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The Half-Lives We Were Living

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The Half-Lives We Were Living

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

Chelsey K. Shannon

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Abstract

This short story collection deals with themes of race, kinship, desire, subjectivity, and appearance vs. reality.

Keywords: blackness; sexuality; identity; kinship; truth; whiteness.

The Yellow Suitcase

Coco Bouldin wouldn't cry about missing her train. Doing that would risk mussing her makeup and so further muss the beauty of her passage, by train, across Italia (which was about the extent of the Italian Coco knew). By her itinerary, she should already be on her way to Florence. But instead, here she was, marooned in Milano Centrale.

It had been a stressful morning spent negotiating Venice's scab-colored cobblestones, the hard shell of her wheelless yellow suitcase forever bludgeoning her ankles, all to sweat the whole ride to Milan in anticipation of her upcoming tight connection. Then to frantically decode the station's transit screens, and scale its torpid escalators, just to be taunted by an empty track where her Firenze-bound train should have been. Her mother had suggested Coco pack a watch and two pairs of sensible shoes in a modern, wheelable suitcase; instead of Italy she'd also suggested Denmark, where things were orderly and where Coco could explore her matrilineal heritage in the flesh.

But! All could still be redeemed. Everything was at Coco's disposal to make her first trip out of the U.S. as lovely as possible: springtime scenes in the lushest country she could readily picture, beautiful men murmuring *ciao bella* as they passed her by. And then, practically speaking, there were the station's porters, whose assistance she could rent. For there was also her little snap-clasp leather pocketbook, the color of bone, hooked tenderly over her forearm, supplied with plenty of Euros and a well-backed debit card. There were the silken peach blouse and cream-colored trousers that encased her. And of course there was the yellow suitcase filled with other beautiful garments, each selected to supply Coco with all the femininity she'd longed for,

in homage to her father's formative nostalgia for the distant time when people would dress up to travel.

Coco's trip had been made possible by the inheritance her father left her, now at her disposal by virtue of her very recent college graduation. So this beauty was being made in his memory, Coco liked to think. In her curation, she tried to channel Grace Kelly, Lauren Bacall, both of the Hepburns: all the stars she'd watched in old pictures with her father, women he'd described as classic beauties. Sometimes he would call Coco's mother the same, even though she lived by her artless digital watch, pragmatic in a way that beauties, in Coco's mythology, had little reason to be.

Her triceps burned as she hauled the suitcase (1960s vintage, like her bone-colored pocketbook) into the depths of Milano Centrale. Beyond the women's restroom, past the luxury shops and *gelaterias*, beside the long line of passengers waiting at the ticket counter, a bank of men vied for the attention of especially pressed travelers. Some of them had called to Coco earlier, and she wanted one of them to assist her now. She wouldn't be waiting in line thirty minutes to feel like a child before the bobbed Italian ticket tellers, their scarlet station regalia clashing with their brick-lipped grins, for, truth be told, the morning had shaken Coco's confidence. She couldn't bear the thought of one of those women making her feel more foolish than she already did.

The only recourse now was to slip into her shell's advantages, to double down on the beauty, however coltish, she'd only recently come to claim. In her skin the color of coarsely ground mustard, her wiry (though not nappy) curls, and her lips pouted and thick (but not too much so), the likeness of Coco's father combined with a confounding resemblance to her still

living and very pale mother. Coco's father had always insisted that his daughter's beauty derived from that combination of dark and light. He had insisted, further, that his daughter could be whoever she wanted to be in the world.

Banking on her exotic allure, Coco approached one of the black porters, matching his eye contact as she moved toward him. The rise of his eyebrows wrinkled his satiny skin, darker than Coco's father's had been, though not by much.

"I missed my train to Florence," she began in English, and in a tone she hoped was charmingly haughty, like maybe Daisy Miller's, who Coco had read about the day before sitting in St. Mark's Square.

The man didn't say anything while he looked her over. Coco hoped he wouldn't notice the bruises on her ankles—just the suitcase that had made them, the anchor of her warmly hued attire.

"I want to know if I have to buy a whole new ticket," she added, still assuming the man understood what she said at all, "or what I should do." Careful, Coco knew. Brisk, but not brusque!

The porter wore jeans, black Chuck Taylors, and an olive green T-shirt with a black button-up over it. The sleeves were rolled to his elbows, revealing forearms wound with plump rivulets of veins.

"My sister, may I please see your ticket?" he asked.

Coaxed by his warmth, Coco opened her pocketbook and handed him the useless slip.

"This vendor is out of the station, across the street," the porter determined. His accent was an aural bricolage Coco couldn't decipher. "I will take you there."

He offered to handle the yellow suitcase, but to her own chagrin, some mixture of vigilance and pride made Coco refuse.

“As you wish,” said the man, then started leading the way back out of the station, weaving through the travelers as through a field of wheat, touching backs and shoulders lightly, scattering them. Coco hurried to nose the suitcase into the pathways he breached before they sewed themselves shut again.

On the curb waiting to cross the street away from Milano Centrale, Coco asked whether the porter worked for the station, though she could guess that the answer was no, between the man’s lack of uniform and his colleagues’ hustling manner.

“I work on my own,” he answered, plucking the sunglasses that hung from his collar and putting them on. “You’re from the States,” he said then.

Coco wasn’t sure whether to be annoyed or pleased by her legibility. “Where are you from?” she asked. Her foot ached when they stepped off the curb. Over the course of the morning, between the tightness of her shoes and the swiftness of her gait, the tender side of her second toe had been sawed open by the corner of her big toenail.

“Africa, what do you think?” He shepherded her through all the cars clogging the station’s drive. “You see black skin. Africa.”

“I’m black and I’m not from Africa!” said Coco.

“You’re not black,” he answered.

This was not new. There’d been the white playmates of childhood assuring Coco that they thought of her as simply tan, or even as simply “herself.” And then black peers in high school,

informing her that she acted white. Then the lonely years of college, where she'd avoided all that altogether. And now, this brief companion, adding his vote to the mix.

“I am black!” Coco all but whined, momentarily breaking character. “My dad was black!”

Since his death, this truth had begun summoning Coco's attention over and over, like a grandfather clock tolling in a quiet home. Whenever it did, Coco felt unprepared, like she was somehow already late. The matter of blackness was now an open question, no longer a background fact fixed by her father's presence in her life. Coco wasn't so sure the porter's thoughts on this would have mattered to her if her father was still around.

But the man just laughed at Coco's credential and asked her name. Then: “Coco,” he echoed, chuckling more.

They mounted the sidewalk on the other side of the street.

“What part of Africa?” Coco asked, really wanting to ask what was so funny about her name. But perhaps she could impress him yet.

“Africa,” he repeated, offering again to handle her suitcase when Coco switched it between her hands a second time. “You don't have to be afraid,” he said with a scoff. But his saying so itself made Coco skittish.

“What part?” she asked again, pretending not to notice the way oncoming pedestrians, if they weren't already deep into their smartphones, averted their gaze from the two of them.

“West Africa.”

Coco brightened. “My dad once took a mission trip to Sierra Leone!”

This time the porter clapped her on her back with rough familiarity. “You’re too much, Coco.”

Would either Hepburn let herself be clapped like that? Or let herself speak in such flustered vacuities? If so, it would surely come across as some type of charming. Coco just felt silly, even if thrilled by the touch of the man’s hand on her back.

But, no time to dwell: they were entering the designated ticketing office. At the counter, the porter spoke to a clerk in a navy blazer. Her sympathetic gaze pushed past him to Coco, whom she sent worried looks, as if she were some sort of captive—until the porter began arguing Coco’s case with, from what she could tell, a fair measure of brusqueness.

Relaxing into her inability to participate in the negotiation, Coco assessed the condition of her pocketbook strap. There was a little tear on the underside of it, which she had all trip long been pretending not to notice while in fact noticing it almost compulsively. It could’ve been her imagination, but it seemed more serious than the last time she checked. There might have been a fresh smudge on the leather, too.

She considered perching on the Tourister suitcase to rest her feet, but then the business was done, to the tune of a fresh ticket issued free of charge; the new train left in an hour. The porter’s competence bolstered Coco, shook everything back into balance. So she left the big yellow suitcase for him, leading the way out of the office.

“Maybe you want to grab a coffee?” she offered on a whim. “Before we go back?”

This time, the man’s mirth at Coco’s very being was displaced by genuine pleasure. “Ah! Viva caffè!”

So they ducked into an economical café with a quick-moving line a few doors down. Even though this solitary trip was designed to provoke melancholic reflections on life, death, and time, Coco realized that she really didn't mind a companion. Standing at the high counter paralleling the storefront window, he drank a strongly sugared espresso, Coco, a cappuccino.

"It's nice to sit and drink a coffee with you, Catherine," said the man into their silence. His conspicuously lifeless lips belied his sincere tone.

The drink Coco had been convincing herself she liked went straight bitter in her mouth. "Excuse me?"

Amusement rocked the calm of his face. "I had to notice. Your ticket. Is this a name you've given yourself, Coco?"

"No." She shook her head, if only at the egregiousness of his misunderstanding. "No, I've always gone by that. No one has ever called me Catherine."

Of course, people had only ever called her Catherine. But within that bald-faced lie dwelled a valiant desire to protect the dignity of Coco, both the name and the persona. Fraudulence was not native to Catherine, but it could be to Coco, who was cultured enough to understand that all ladyhood depended on performance, which could, in dire scenarios, be seen as outright artifice. But it all came from a harmless desire: for beauty.

"Curious," the man responded.

"Well, what's your name?" Coco said, half indignant, half ashamed that it had taken her this long to ask. "Amaechi," Coco echoed once he told her.

But she did not feel any closer to him, really. It was not a name she'd encountered before, in books, in real life, or in any of her father's tales of his mission trip—which had, she realized

now, been consistently and curiously absent any African names at all, whether of individuals or of tribes. She wondered again where Amaechi had grown up.

“How long have you been in Milan?” Coco mimed a sip of her coffee.

“A year almost.” Amaechi drained his cup, as if eager to move along.

“Do you like it?”

“No,” he answered softly, with the slightest turn of his head. He could have been studying the white lettering on the café window, or looking somewhere far beyond it.

“What brought you?” Coco asked, aware that her phrasing assumed the luxury of choice, which she dimly understood may or may not apply here. Yet she couldn’t think of another way to ask.

She didn’t blame Amaechi for not answering her, if the answer was as un-beautiful as the trouble that passed over his face. He didn’t even shake his head, just traced his finger through some sugar someone else had spilt on the counter.

“No reason that concerns you,” he said finally.

“The station is beautiful...” Coco observed after a moment, risking banality to fill the silence. From where they sat, they could see parts of its façade through the windows. She didn’t really like how it looked; it was just an obvious thing to comment on.

Amaechi seemed to be purposefully distracting himself now, digging his hand into the pockets of his jeans and pulling out various scraps of paper that he laid on the counter. Still, he smirked at Coco’s remark.

“See the stone lions, the falcons that sit across the roof?” he asked. He pointed out the ugly gargoyles, as if Coco might miss them. “Mussolini’s idea. He wanted it to look forceful.”

“He built it?”

Amaechi grinned. “I doubt personally, Catherine.”

Coco rolled her eyes, secretly pleased to be teased again. “It’s newer than I thought, then. It looks ancient.”

“Europe has a way of pretending it contains all of time.” His mild tone wielded more contempt than a scornful one could. “Do you know about the Nazi room?”

When he looked her in the eye again, Coco shook her head no.

“Somewhere in the station,” Amaechi said, “there’s a room where the floor is a swastika made of tile. Built to receive Hitler with all proper respects. Still there.”

Coco thought this sounded like an urban legend from a high school more cosmopolitan than her own. The thought of such a room, hidden away deep inside the fake-ancient station, unsettled her to the point of her wishing he hadn’t brought it up.

“Why?” she asked, pushing her half-drunk cappuccino away.

Amaechi re-rolled his shirt sleeves before reaching for her suitcase. “Could be shame,” he said with a shrug, “or it could be pride.”

Coco picked up her purse from the counter, minding the tear in the strap. “How do you know so much about the station?”

Amaechi huffed. “Of course I read about it, Catherine. Don’t you know Wikipedia? Perfect for browsing while the laundry gets done.”

Abashed but smiling, she followed him out of the coffeeshop. These were the best parts of those charmed, expat-filled books Coco loved losing sight of herself in. In them, Americans, whose maleness Coco accepted and whose whiteness she never thought to question, would hap-

pen upon each other on their continental travels, plucking up the odd sympathetic local along the way. They'd all get drunk together and become something like close friends, till suddenly, they'd never see each other again... Things like that.

Now, Coco found herself thinking more about such books than the fact of having drunk coffee with Amaechi or of whatever it was in his past that he hadn't wanted to share with her. She was already thinking ahead to her train ride to Florence, of what she might read, having finished with *Daisy Miller* before getting to Milan. Of all the books she'd brought along on the trip, only two were written by black writers: an anthology of African-American poetry and *Giovanni's Room*. The former, Coco had addressed over a cannoli in Venice, only to be struck by a line by a poet named Amiri Baraka, talking about smearing black poems on "girdlemamma mulatto bitches," whose brains he compared to "red jelly stuck between 'lizabeth taylor's toes." Insulted as she'd never been, Coco returned swiftly to her Fitzgerald.

But walking beside Amaechi now, it suddenly seemed only natural to Coco that she spend time with some black writers in the midst of all this European pretension, as Amaechi had helped her to recognize. After all, she could be an appreciative traveler and an interloping critic. New train ticket in hand, pretty purse on her arm, Coco Bouldin was sure she could be all that she wanted to be, just like her father had always said.

* * *

Outside on the street, Coco and Amaechi waited to cross the same boulevard of half an hour earlier. The veins of Amaechi's forearms surged as he transferred the yellow suitcase from one hand to the other.

Then: "Your father is black," he repeated out of nowhere, cackling briefly up at the sky. He'd gotten the verb tense wrong, as if to add salt to his mockery.

"What's so funny?" Coco asked.

"You're an American, Catherine."

"So?"

"What is your mother?"

"What do you think?" Coco parroted, cocking her hip. "White. You see my skin." The light changed, and they started across the street.

Amaechi raised an eyebrow. "*Africans* are black."

"I never said I was African." Despite herself, emotion thickened her words.

"You said you were black."

"Americans can be black! You're the one who called me your sister."

Amaechi shook his head as they approached the station. "It's only an expression of chumminess where I come from. Americans are Americans, Africans, Africans—black." Then he shattered his seriousness with a deliberate grin. "Why make it complicated, dear Catherine?"

Dodging Amaechi's glances as they waded back through the crowded station entrance, Coco had little choice but to think again of her father. He was the only black American in the photos from his West African trip, which showed his beaming face crushed against the sunburnt

cheeks of his fellow missionaries in one shot and how he kept his distance from the village's deep-burnished elders in another.

Still, he'd spoken of the experience with repletion. He'd called it the most meaningful week of his life. Coco and her father had planned to take a mission trip together when she finished college. Instead, she'd ended up buying tickets to Europe, alone.

Amaechi strained to open the door for Coco with his free hand.

"You never answered my question," she said suddenly. Several other travelers slipped through the door along with Coco. "Earlier," she continued once Amaechi made his way inside. "I wanted to know why you're here." Over the renewed din of the lobby, her words felt excessive. But Coco found that she needed to know.

"Why are *you* here?" Amaechi answered, with a twinge of irritation.

He peered up at the transit screens, maintaining the suitcase as he did, where Coco would have relished the chance to set it down. Watching him, she was pained to remember the weight of the thing, how she wouldn't be relieved of it until she was back home again. Then, her trip would become nothing but a collection of impressions: the breeze, smelling of pigeon musk and brine, billowing the curtains of the Venetian hostel room, bathing the strangers sleeping around her in sangria morning light. The steaming ravioli stuffed with cornmeal and cheese. The dark sheen of Amaechi's face, the sharp plane of his nose, the whiteness of his teeth bared by a laugh. All of that, Coco would one day recall with a winsome pang over freezer burnt domestic gelato, scrolling through the pixels on some smudged screen.

One day. But now: "For the beauty," she answered. That's why she was here in Italia.

Fully expecting him to mock her some more, Coco was surprised when Amaechi simply nodded.

“That’s right,” he said, standing tall amidst the eddying travelers. “Of course, Catherine. This is, again, where we are different.”

“Where are you from?” she asked again, heeding the solemn tolling inside her; they would be parting ways so soon.

Amaechi sighed like an impatient teacher, the kind young Catherine would have gone home to her father and whined about. “Nigeria.”

“Why are you here?”

“Nigeria,” he said again. “My country is in crisis.” He looked around the station as if warding off the sight of it. “I am a refugee.”

More than comprehending this statement, Coco felt it, and felt herself foolish and naive by virtue of it. To think she’d had the nerve to think of herself as road-weary! Seeing Amaechi there with her suitcase was suddenly like seeing him holding everything he owned—and the fact that the suitcase was Coco’s, whose nostalgic dresses and novels would do Amaechi little good, somehow did not diminish the resonance of this image. It was searing into Coco’s brain as she would remember it, and remember Amaechi, long after she’d decided never to mention their encounter in any recitals of her Italian escapades to come.

Regardless, the clock was ticking toward her departure.

“Come, sister,” Amaechi said. “We won’t have a repeat.”

Remembering the Nazi room, Coco wondered if their purposeful movements excited the dust motes inside it, if they inhaled them as they hustled through Milano Centrale. She was

thrilled and appalled by the very thought, and she was thrilled and alarmed by Amaechi's hand grasping her elbow, lightly, as if she were a tame but delicate creature he meant to protect.

At the sight of the passengers bottlenecking between the ticket-checking guards at the main platform, Coco felt a pang of urgency. Soon, she'd have to resolve the blush of their encounter with one final burst of insouciance, the kind by which Amaechi would remember her fondly, and with a flicker of desire.

So, pretending a Hemingway character's bottle of lunchtime wine coursed through her system, Coco spoke to Amaechi like an old companion as they joined the line, confessing that she was still mad at herself for missing the earlier train.

"Stop thinking about it," he answered, with a bluntness, yes, like someone close. "Maybe this one is better for you. Everything happens for a reason. We don't know. God knows."

His gaze was nomadic again, seeking everything but Coco. Above their heads arched the platform's magnificent vault, its windowpanes glowing with antique sun and partitioned by black iron rods, like an enormous insect's page-yellow wing. The light spilled down over the bustling passengers, warming the crown of Coco's curls.

She ignored the pain in her toe as she and Amaechi advanced incrementally in the line. Amaechi was once again rifling through his pockets, which signaled to Coco the pinnacle of their approaching adieu: his payment. It was her responsibility to initiate, and it would unfortunately entail stressing her pocketbook's injured strap, just long enough to find inside the purse some combination of coins to compensate Amaechi for his assistance, and maybe even more than that: Coco couldn't deny wanting to compensate him for all the trouble he'd seen, trouble she couldn't fathom, and perhaps wouldn't want to if she could.

And then she would take back the yellow suitcase and be on her way. For, all sentimental attachments aside, everything was back on track: the events of the day could still be set with a postcard gloss, worthy of postage across the Atlantic back home.

On the strength of this conviction, Coco reached for the purse, telling Amaechi that she could take it from here.

“I will take you to the track.” His pocket finally yielded a piece of paper that looked like a ticket. “I could not forgive myself if you missed your train a second time.”

The chiseled profiles of the ticket checkers were unsmiling, and Catherine, if not Coco, had long been compelled by even the pretense of authority.

“What about them?” she asked, feeling artless as she did. “What if they ask for ID?”

“It is no problem, sister,” Amaechi said, a little peevish, and traded the suitcase and the pseudo-ticket between his hands so that he stood closer to Coco. She half-ignored the way their bodies jostled together in the fracas, the slide of Amaechi’s arm against hers.

“You should stay longer in Milano!” he urged, suddenly cheerful as they drew ever closer to the guards. “I could show you, show you to my friends.”

“After all this trouble?” she said, equal parts coy and cross. But the fantasy was clearly implied.

They reached the portal to the platform before he could say anything more. As he had intimated, and to Coco’s relief, the guards gave Amaechi’s ticket no special scrutiny, nor did they ask for his identification or for hers. The whole thing was simply a matter of ceremony, although, Coco couldn’t pretend she hadn’t noticed the hardness that crept into the guard’s eyes as he glanced between herself and Amaechi, standing together.

“Looks like you’re coming with me instead,” Coco joked as the two of them moved toward track seven. Amaechi tried to laugh, but it came out short and forced. “What did you just show them?” she pressed.

“Just an old ticket,” he answered, waving the matter away with his hand. “I told you, they don’t look. I’ll slip back out, no problem.”

He seemed to want her to believe that this was something he did all the time. Yet Coco could tell his cockiness was less heartfelt than before. She surmised that nothing could totally displace the grim possibility of being caught. She couldn’t bear the thought of Amaechi being somehow punished for helping her, not that she even knew for certain what that would entail for him. In the same breath she surmised that if such an axe were to fall, it wouldn’t be on the one day Amaechi agreed to assist Coco Bouldin.

It was much too ugly to entertain, and anyway, there her Firenze-bound train gleamed on the track. Amaechi finally set her suitcase down beside it.

“Well, Catherine,” he said, “I hope the rest of your trip is pleasant and safe, and you return to Milano again one day.”

“I hope to,” she answered, striking a rather graceless pose by stabilizing the bottom of her pocketbook against her thigh. That way she didn’t have to strain the strap after all, and maybe he would see it as a charming enough gesture for the two of them to go out on.

But by the time Coco, coins in hand, looked up again to pay him, Amaechi’s face was closing like a heavy door, everything that lay behind it suddenly locked away from this last moment of the two of them standing there, facing one another.

Coco stood with her back to the scarlet blur of the station cops who charged from the front of the platform. But in one more second she saw them slam Amaechi against the waiting train like he was a presumed purse mugger, Coco the damsel, pivotal and irrelevant at once.

“My friend! My sister!” Amaechi shouted, either of her names apparently forgotten. Coco looked on in immobilized lucidity. It was not a scene out of any book she'd care to read. “Everything's fine!” he called. “Your ticket is good.”

Coco had never doubted that—and she wanted to say so.

“It's because I'm black!” Amaechi shouted, his chest still to the train, his antecedent achingly undefined. For an instant, Coco saw her father there in his place.

“Hey!” she cried suddenly, snapping out of her reverie. “What are you doing?! He didn't do anything!”

The men didn't hear her. They spoke in brutal Italian, but Coco could tell that they were demanding Amaechi's papers.

“I'm a Christian!” Amaechi continued in English, and so still addressing Coco, as if she were the one he had to convince. “I believe in God!”

But a cop grabbed Coco's suitcase and started corralling her toward the steps that disappeared into the train, setting her suitcase on the ground in front of them to block her way.

“Your papers, too,” he said, addressing her in English as well.

By now the Hepburns were a forgotten fantasy. But there was something, Coco prayed, surely something to her elegant trousers and manicured hands, to her heliotropic hair corkscrewing up toward the God that her friend still believed in. Coco pried the beige pocketbook open and pulled out her passport, slamming it into the cop's waiting hand.

For they were going to listen, and she, Coco, would be the one to let it be known: “This isn't right!” she bellowed.

But the officials were grabbing Amaechi’s hands, spitting “*Basta!*” at his repeating self-defenses. Other passengers went along, averting their eyes.

“Fine.” The cop handed Coco her passport, turning his back to her. When she poked him hard in the bicep, he whirled around again. “What, girl!”

“Well!? He didn’t do anything!” She folded her arms. “He helped me! I needed help!”

“Your passport?” the man replied. “He has none. He has no business here.”

Before Coco could say more, the cop took her arm, his grip a clamp compared to Amaechi’s tentative touch. With the other hand he gave a dismissive wave to his counterparts, who now had Amaechi cuffed and cowed. Then he snatched up the yellow suitcase in an elegant sweep and forced Coco onto the train, now sounding its warning whistle.

In vain, Coco looked back over her shoulder. The cop was following close behind her. There went Amaechi’s receding back, twinkling with handcuffs.

This wasn’t how it was supposed to go, not remotely. They were supposed to listen to her. Amaechi expected her to make them listen to her.

The cop stayed blocking Coco, but she could push past him. She could demand justice for her brother, her friend. Demand a translator, a lawyer, whatever it took! Coco could knock off the cop’s hat and slap the smirk from his face. She imagined her fingernails turned to talons, the tips of her curls sprouting fanged little heads.

She could do it, before it was too late. Before the train started moving. Before she would suddenly never see Amaechi again...

Yet moments later Coco was in her assigned seat, her ticket indeed perfectly in order, the yellow suitcase and the bone-colored pocketbook stowed securely beneath her. *Giovanni's Room* was unopened in Coco's lap. Instead of feeling comforted by the Baldwin novel as she'd hoped, Coco found herself confused by the bloneness of its narrator, the opening reference to his conquering ancestors. That wasn't anything she cared to escape into right now—and Coco was still too adrenalized to concentrate, anyhow. At the same time, she knew that reflecting back on her afternoon would end her up in a tremulous despair.

So Coco was thinking ahead, thinking to when she'd reach Florence and lug her battering ram of a suitcase under its mesmeric basilica's glower, and over its beguiling footbridges, striking ankles wherever she went. The pocketbook would get shoved under her perspiring armpit, no longer to dangle from her arm, its strap having been fatally abused in the scuffle at Milano Centrale.

But after that cumbersome journey to her room for the night, Coco decided that she would shower, get into her fresh bed, and write her mother an overdue trip update. She would write that here it was beautiful, but she still looked forward to coming home. She would not write of Amaechi. She would not wonder to her mother what had happened between the guards waving them through and the police arresting Amaechi—what it was that had made them come for him, if he was right that it was because he was black, and how Coco herself fit into that. Nor would she write of the cop who had forced her onto the train and then explained to her how “that man” was dangerous: for her, for the station, and for, he said without saying, the country and the world. She wouldn't mention how her defiance had been a fruit scorched to a leathery skin by his leer.

Coco swept her hands over her tired arms. In her official testament, her trip would be unsullied, perfectly worthy of the circumstances that prompted it—and her mother would never know how disorderly Coco had been to have to ask for Amaechi’s help in the first place. Indeed, Coco couldn’t bear to ask herself whether things at Milano Centrale would’ve turned out differently if she looked more like her mother, or like Elizabeth Taylor, who in this moment Coco could believe had her brains between her toes.

Those were the things Coco did not wish to deal with, the baggage of her days. Handling it hurt her, like it hurt her to know that she was even now in a sense on her way home, and so was Amaechi, and this would never mean the same thing for the two of them, all because she’d wanted to pay him for showing her how lost she was.

She would forget Milano Centrale. Now ninety minutes from Florence, Coco tried to convince herself that, for the sake of her sanity, she had no other option.

But once summoned, she knew she couldn’t forget—and what had this day been if not one irrefutable summoning?

Coco bent and started easing the yellow suitcase out from under her seat. The train was chilly and she needed another layer. Of course the side with the twin toggle latches faced toward the back, out of her reach. She had to slide the suitcase almost completely out in order to swing it open, her legs planted on either side of it in such a way that had Coco been wearing a dress, she imagined it would look like a birth.

The most accessible wrap was an old purple cardigan she’d brought for wearing to bed. It clashed with her outfit’s palette, but Coco didn’t care. Pulling it on, she fantasized Amaechi riding along with her, teasing her for this moment’s inelegance like a brother, a friend, or even a

lover would—like somebody, whichever he was, who would save you if he could, and who you would save if you could, too.

Tears clouded Coco's vision as the passengers around her shifted in their seats. She was bothering them, she gathered, with her emotion. But look at what Amaechi had lost, then look at all that Coco had retained: beauty. Look at the cantaloupe sunset ripening around the train. Look at Verona, risen from the river like Venus's nacreous half-shell.

The train raced ahead. How soon would Amaechi be on a plane back to Nigeria? Was there any way he could still be right, about God having excellent reasons?

Coco Bouldin wasn't so sure. She pitched her stare beyond the train window, pulling the cardigan more tightly around her. Her gaze caught on a siege of gray cranes standing in a backlit marsh, all pecking the water for what sustenance they could find—there, and then disappeared from her sight.

Mary Alice's Easter Bunny

Mary Alice's brother Jack was a Cub Scout who liked to capture cicadas and track their starvation. Mary Alice's father was a clerk who liked to bet on horse races. Mary Alice's mother was a seamstress who did all the things a mother ought to do. Mary Alice was the baby of the family.

When Father was listening to the races, he liked the whole house to be quiet. And on the night of Holy Saturday, 1939, it was. Father sat pitched forward in his armchair, tenting his fingers in front of his frown. Mary Alice's favorite lamp, with the ivory fringe around its shade, made the brown of her father's whiskey on the end table glow.

From the rug where she knelt with her paper dolls, Mary Alice watched the ice cubes dance. A drink meant the race was extra important. In the corner of the parlor, Mother worked on her sewing. Mary Alice could not see her, but the grumble of her machine was like a familiar lullaby.

There on the old rug she'd watched Mother beat clean more times than she could remember, surrounded by the flat, pretty faces that she loved, Mary Alice knew she should be at peace: she was cradled in the web of her parents' quiet, and the paper outfits spread around her reminded her of Miss Berry, her teacher, whom Mary Alice loved very dearly. Unlike the nuns who taught at their school, Miss Berry could wear dresses of all patterns and shades. Miss Berry could wear earrings and necklaces with pendants that weren't crosses. Punching out a party dress along the thick paper's dotted lines, Mary Alice thought how nice Miss Berry's auburn hair looked when she wore that shade of green, and how it was almost too pleasurable that the only thing be-

tween her and seeing Miss Berry again was Easter Sunday. That was Mary Alice's favorite holiday, filled with pretty eggs, pretty dresses, and homilies full of hope.

The window behind Father's profile showed the sun beginning to set, and the spaghetti casserole in the oven smelled almost done. Jack was due at any moment.

Father preferred to hit Jack only when he was very very bad. Bad like flushing Mother's pills down the toilet, or Indian-burning Mary Alice's arm when she was barely a toddler, or trying to choke Father while he was napping, then laughing it off as a gag.

And Mother? She'd explain that Jack was bright and high-spirited to whoever came asking about him, until the next thing happened, when she would apologize, and sometimes cry, and explain it again, and usually whoever it was accepted what she said, things being rough all over, and no grownups, Mary Alice gathered, living life as they would want to—except perhaps Miss Berry, who she couldn't picture needing anything from anyone as desperately as Mother did sometimes. Mother had a harder time explaining things to the grocer, or the light bill collector, or to the bank.

Above Mary Alice, Father cleared his throat. The race was getting set to begin.

"I hope this one is worth it, Frank," Mother murmured from her corner.

"It will be," Father said briefly, taking his drink into his hand. "Can't Wait will take it..." Father did guess the right horse from time to time; sometimes Mary Alice even helped, and Father would treat her to a chocolate malt.

But then, with the jerk and the slam, the sound of windows rattling, none of that mattered. "I'm home!" Jack called as he tore through the house. "I got four marbles off that clod Hector down the street!"

Father stiffened, and leaned in even closer to the radio, which was now spewing out the strange names of all the different horses. Mother kept sewing. Mary Alice hunkered over her dolls, willing her heart to beat slower instead of faster. She didn't want Jack to notice her a second sooner than he had to.

“Quiet, son...” Father said, belatedly.

Mary Alice tracked the sound of Jack's footsteps into the kitchen, from whence came a solid plunk of glass on wood. Mary Alice pictured Jack's big jar of marbles in the middle of the dinner table she'd set for Mother—one of the few possessions Jack really cherished, because so many of the marbles came from disgruntled playmates bound to the dictum of keepsies.

“Jackie, put those away,” said Mother. “We'll eat soon.”

“Hush!” said Father.

Mary Alice got up, unasked, to turn up the radio's volume. The announcer was announcing the race's second round.

“Sissy!” Jack hollered over it. “Come peep my new aggie.”

Mary Alice could still remember the sweat-and-mineral smell of Jack's old aggie, the one he'd once tried to shove up her nose once while she slept. When she'd woken Mother, crying, her left nostril red and swollen, both children had been sent back to bed with reprimands of how dearly their parents needed their rest. And when the children had marched themselves straight to bed as instructed, Jack whispered to Mary Alice that some Petroleum should do the trick the next time.

Eying Jack from across the parlor, Mary Alice remained right where she stood.

“Come on!” he whined, grabbing the jar of marbles from the table and starting to run toward Mary Alice. “It’s aces, I swear!”

“Jack!” It was in the final round, and it was Father who Mary Alice was studying when the stupendous crash happened.

There on the threshold between the parlor and the dining room was Jack, his hands empty and all the glass at his feet, some of it in juicy shards, and some in the same smooth shapes as ever: marbles hurtling across the floorboards, crimson and amber and jasper spheres skating toward every corner of the Vernons’ parlor.

“Oops,” said Jack.

“It’s El Chico!” the radio roared. “Next month, El Chico takes on the Kentucky Derby! We really—”

There was Father at the radio, his back to the rest of the room, defeat resting heavy on his shoulders.

“Jack,” Father said finally into the silence, “why do you insist on making such an intolerable ruckus?”

In the kitchen, a timer went off. Mother got up from her machine to tend to the casserole. “I guess that horse could wait, after all...” she said, stepping around the glass surrounding Jack, fists clenched at her sides.

Jack looked from Mother to Father. “Well, don’t take it wrong, Dick Daddy,” he began, to Mary Alice’s scandal, “but I don’t think us being church mice will help you pick good horses.”

Mary Alice stood riveted by a sequence of movements she'd never witnessed before: Mother discarded the cherry red oven mitt, turned Jack to face her, and slapped him across the face, once, hard.

“Mister, that is an unacceptable way to speak to your father! Frank.” Mother turned to Father in the parlor, her voice warbling, not noticing Mary Alice, who stood there with an alien feeling rising up in response to the sight of her brother receiving his due retribution. “Frank, how will he learn?”

Before Mother could finish her question, Father brushed past Mary Alice with a swift determination, removing his belt as he went. Watching Father approach him, Jack's face betrayed no fear. Instead, his lips curled in a way that reminded Mary Alice of the illustration of Cain in her children's Bible, watching silly Abel offering his harvest to God.

Father's beatings were usually perfunctory, but this one lasted much longer. The fact of Mother and now Father striking Jack deepened Mary Alice's strange sensation as she watched. The frightened part of her wanted to go and hide behind the barren china hutch. A hungrier part of her was content to stay right where she was, feasting her eyes and feeding the warmth in the depths of her belly, the tingle around the edges of her ears and lips.

Jack laughed until Father made it so he couldn't anymore. Then, Father grabbed his hat and left. Mary Alice's fingertips pulsed against the flat green dress in her hand.

Mary Alice stood watching as Mother examined Jack's backside for damage. Jack's suspender straps and knickers were all bunched around his feet. His cheek was bright where Mother had slapped him. He looked foolish! He looked helpless. Still, the strange pleasure was fading—and in approaching memorial of it, Mary Alice couldn't help but smile.

It was in that instant that Jack looked up from his feet. When he saw Mary Alice smiling, his face roared into a silent fury.

“Momma?” asked Mary Alice, frightened suddenly. The marbles and the shards of jar made a gleaming minefield between Mary Alice and Mother.

“Mary Alice is laughing at me, Mother,” Jack said in a small voice that did not match his angry eyes. He stared at Mary Alice, like he knew exactly how she'd felt just now, standing there and watching him be weak. Like he'd like to see her try and come closer, slip, and tear the pale heel of her hand against one of his jar's jagged shards.

“No one's laughing,” Mother murmured. She had Jack go lay belly-down on the couch while she went for the broom.

Mary Alice called to her again. This time it came out as a shriek.

“Not now, Mary Alice!”

Jack glowered up at her, his face half-buried in the cushion. “Not now, Mary Alice,” Jack repeated. But from him it was a threat: she would pay for what she'd felt not now, but later. Jack would make sure of it.

Mary Alice left the house, like Father had before her. Outside, the sky above the quiet street was thick with violet clouds. She still had the green party dress, but Mary Alice felt hidden from God.

* * *

By the next morning, God had found her again: the bunny Mary Alice found in her Easter basket after church was miles better than a paper doll, and soft as the clouds the angels might lean on to peer down at the humanity below. Gabriel—for that’s what Mary Alice decided right then to name him—was like a little cloud himself, pure and fluffy white. He had a somber expression and an honest cotton tail. His pink triangle nose quivered with his shallow breaths, which seemed to mirror the twiddling heart Mary Alice felt beneath his velvety fur.

“It’s too expensive to feed,” Jack opined, wrinkling his nose.

Mary Alice’s brother looked smart with his slicked back hair and starched shirt, and his fingernails brushed clean, just like Mary Alice’s, for the moment when they’d kneel before the golden altar and receive the Eucharist on their tongues. Sitting as a family in the jewel-hued light of the stained glass, it had been easy to forget the events of the previous evening.

But the alarm Mary Alice felt the longer Jack loomed over her bunny reminded her. Standing there with Gabriel in her cradling arms, Mary Alice experienced a different pleasure from last night before, a good feeling she imagined her brother wouldn’t be able to understand. It was a feeling of an almost euphoric comfort. Mary Alice understood that protecting that good feeling was the same thing as protecting Gabriel.

Behind Jack, Mother wore a dress the color of butter. Father was already lying down inside. When Mary Alice clutched Gabriel away from Jack, Mother frowned.

“Oh,” Mother said, laying a hand on Jack’s shoulder, “he’ll earn his keep by eating up all our scraps. And he will live in the pen out here in the yard,” Mother went on, “until your father can build him a hutch.”

These details did not concern Mary Alice. “Why would the Easter Bunny bring me such a bunny pal?”

Mother smiled. “He must’ve thought you deserved a special little friend.” To Mary Alice’s surprise, Mother’s eyes misted with tears. Then she knelt before Jack and Mary Alice. “You kids deserve a nice Easter.” Mary Alice watched Mother cup Jack’s cheek, the same cheek she’d slapped—an act for which Mary Alice had heard her apologize to Jack before church this morning. “And Jackie, after last night, well...” she went on, “I just don’t want you to feel left out that the Easter Bunny brought Mary Alice such a special gift this year.”

Jack’s own basket contained plenty of candy and a brand new baseball. Jack looked at the basket, then at Gabriel, hesitating.

“Aw, it’s all right, Mother,” he answered with a stretch of his lips. “It’s good for a girl like Mary Alice to have something to take care of.”

Mother was as charmed by Jack’s magnanimity as Mary Alice was unsettled.

“Oh, Jackie.” She gave his cheek a parting pinch, then looked at Mary Alice. “And Mary Alice, it’s your responsibility to take care of him.”

“Can I help, too, Mother?” Jack chimed in, reaching to stroke Gabriel with much too heavy of a hand. “I’d like to.” Mary Alice felt Gabriel’s heart beat faster.

“Of course,” Mother answered tenderly. “You two can take care of him together.”

Later that day, Mary Alice found Jack hanging around Gabriel’s pen. When she stepped outside, he turned to her.

“What are you doing?!” she cried, running toward him.

“Why, nothing, Sissy.”

There was Gabriel, hopping, paying no attention to either of them, nibbling on the lacy carrots tops Mother must have brought out.

“I was just feeding him for you,” said Jack as he turned to head back to the house. “Don't blow your wig.”

Mary Alice stepped into Gabriel's pen and sat to pull the bunny into her lap, eyeing the greens with fresh suspicion.

* * *

For Mary Alice, the best part of second grade was getting to skip recess sometimes to sharpen pencils and clap out erasers while Miss Berry sat at her desk and watched over her. It was during these times that Mary Alice learned that Miss Berry spread her lunch out on a colorful handkerchief and that she often smelled like flowers.

To see her again back at school after Easter Monday, her hair in pretty fingerwaves—it was so sweet it was almost unbearable. But to Mary Alice's chagrin, today Miss Berry encouraged Mary Alice to play outside. She spent the whole time telling everyone about Gabriel and his perfection.

When Mary Alice rushed to be first to return to the classroom, a boy named Robert was already at his desk. And on top of Mary Alice's gleamed a cellophane-wrapped package of chocolate turtles.

Over the holiday Mary Alice had forgotten completely about Robert, who was new to the class and who stayed inside during recess sometimes, too. So far Mary Alice did not like Robert

because he never helped Miss Berry with her classroom chores. And sometimes Mary Alice would catch him watching her go about her chores.

“What’s this?” Mary Alice said to Miss Berry, ignoring Robert, pointing at the candy on her desk.

Miss Berry smiled. “I think Robert brought you a little Easter treat. Wasn’t that nice?”

Mary Alice felt puffed up from her playground braggadocio. She’d been entrusted with Gabriel, after all, by none but the Easter Bunny himself. Not even Jack could take that away from her—his unspoken threat was no match against her classmates’ envy. Maybe for once, the both of them had both what they deserved: Mary Alice, a pet, and Jack, a good slap. Maybe it was an Easter miracle.

“Do these turtles have peanuts in them, or pecans?” Mary Alice inquired coolly, hoping to impress Miss Berry with her discernment.

Instead, her teacher frowned. “Mary Alice! How rude and unlike you. Please say thank you to Robert this minute.”

Mary Alice turned to face the boy who, for what she could tell from his face, was perhaps unaware that they were talking about him. With his brown shorts and shirt, he looked like a little monk peering up at Mary Alice. For a second, Mary Alice imagined kissing Robert like Mother’s favorite star Greta Garbo would kiss a movie man.

“I’m sorry, Robert,” Mary Alice mumbled. “I like chocolate turtles very much. Thank you.”

Out of guilt, Mary Alice let Robert walk home her home that afternoon.

“I think you’re the prettiest girl in class,” he told her.

In fact, Mary Alice had once been the winner of a baby beauty contest, as verified by her blonde curls, china blue eyes, and pink cheeks. But all Mary Alice could think about was Gabriel. All day she'd dreamt of cuddling him, of feeling his heartbeat against her hand, of telling him about Robert's chocolates, and Miss Berry, and reminding him to watch out for Jack.

They reached Mary Alice's house. When Robert asked if he could come in and play, Mary Alice said no.

Gabriel raised up onto his hind legs when she went back to check on him, the perfect picture of happy anticipation. Mary Alice was smitten.

The next day at recess Miss Berry let Mary Alice stay inside. Once Mary Alice was through with washing down the blackboard, her teacher beckoned her over to her desk. Mary Alice was so elated, Miss Berry's question—"Did you enjoy Robert's turtles?"—took a moment for her to understand. On her desktop, sticks of celery and the crust of an egg salad sandwich were spread on a handkerchief. Remembering her babyish peanut butter and jelly of earlier, Mary Alice nodded.

"Mary Alice, will you help me with something?"

There were little gems in Miss Berry's earlobes the same color as the celery. When you were close enough, you could see that her eyetooth was especially pointy—all of which Mary Alice found secretly thrilling.

"Anything," she breathed.

"Well, being the new kid in class can be difficult," Miss Berry explained. "I worry Robert is lonely."

Much as she disliked Robert, Mary Alice could sympathize. Before Gabriel came, she realized, she'd been lonesome at home often enough, between Mother and Father's working, and their quarreling, and Jack.

"Well," Miss Berry went on, "do you think you could be a friend to him? We already know he'd like to be yours."

Mary Alice smiled and nodded. If her being friends with Robert would make Miss Berry happy, she could do it. Mary Alice had a sudden and desperate desire to tell Miss Berry about Gabriel—to prove to her that she was right in selecting Mary Alice to help out a kid in need, right to think Mary Alice had more than enough love to spare.

"Miss Berry, you know what I got in my basket this Easter?" Mary Alice began, but just then, the other children started arriving back from recess.

"Tell me later, Mary Alice," Miss Berry answered a wink, and sent Mary Alice back to her seat.

* * *

Walking home that afternoon, Mary Alice issued Robert a prized invitation to make good on their budding friendship: "You wanna come and meet my bunny?"

"Okay," he answered. Mary Alice offered him her arm.

The pair passed Mother at her machine on their way to the backyard.

"This is my friend Robert Caldwell, Momma," Mary Alice announced.

Mother looked up from her work to smile at them. “Well, how nice to meet you, Robert. Jack’s already out there.” She went back to pushing her red gingham fabric under the machine’s jabbing needle.

Mary Alice shivered. She’d thought Jack had lost interest in him. For the past few days, he’d let them be.

“But Gabriel’s my bunny,” she cried, “and Robert came to meet him!” She started dragging her guest toward the back door.

“Oh, don’t be greedy, Mary Alice!” Mother called after them.

Stepping outside, the first thing Mary Alice saw was the back of Jack’s head. His shins and feet were hidden behind the chicken wire surrounding Gabriel’s area.

“Hey!” Mary Alice shouted.

Jack spun around and served her and Robert a thousand-watt grin. “Sissy! And who’s this dunce?”

Emboldened by Robert’s witnessing, Miss Berry’s blessing, and the seriousness of her responsibility to her bunny, Mary Alice yanked herself away from Robert and rushed to the pen.

“Let us alone, Jack! Robert is here to play with Gabriel.” She was relieved to spot Gabriel huddled at the edge of the pen, next to a pile of straw. She was exhilarated to hear her own voice rising up from deep within her.

Short of being intimidated, Jack became excited. “Well, you’re being awfully bossy.” He leaned back from her, crossing his arms. “What would Father Tompkins say?”

“That you’re a mean brother,” Mary Alice said, crossing her arms as well, “and this is *my* bunny. No matter what Mother says.”

Jack hooted like Daffy Duck. “Is this my goody-two-shoes baby sister? Golly.” Then the mirth slid off his face like someone had wiped it clean. “I have a game we can all play with Gabriel.”

Then Jack turned and, from the space between the back of the pen and the wooden fence around the Vernon’s yard, withdrew his polished wooden baseball bat.

“Jack, no!” Birds rose up out of the sycamore.

Jack lofted the bat over his shoulder. “Mother asked me to put it out of its misery already.”

“You’re a rotten liar, Jack!” But even as she said so, Jack was closing in on Gabriel, who was stuck like a tuft of cotton between the wire and the straw. Mary Alice leapt for the tip of the bat, but Jack jerked it out of her reach.

Then he shoved her to the ground with his shoulder. “C’mon! Be a good sport.”

Jack crouched to drag Gabriel from the cranny where he hid.

Mary Alice would’ve attacked Jack from behind, grabbed his head from behind, pressed her fingers into his eyeballs till he hit her, bit her, or worse—but she was still struggling to regain the wind he knocked out of her. She watched Jack drop Gabriel into the middle of the pen, Jack’s body between Mary Alice and the bunny.

Where was Mother? Father? Miss Berry? Mary Alice pressed herself up on her aching elbow, ready to spend all her strength defending Gabriel, even if it would never be enough.

What Mary Alice didn’t expect was the brown blur of Robert to trample the chicken wire, head bent, and ram his skull right into the side of Jack’s solar plexus.

Mary Alice screamed as her brother fell to the ground with a wince, curling like a worm.

Robert began kicking Jack in the ribs. Mary Alice scrambled to pick up Gabriel, who'd managed to stay clear of the scuffle. The poor bunny's heart was beating harder and faster than Mary Alice thought it could, his dark marble eyes frantic.

Mary Alice seethed. "Ooh, get him, Robert!"

Robert's kicks fell rhythmic and heavy. It was strange to Mary Alice that for the great percussive show Gabriel's heart was putting on, the bunny made not a peep. The comfort of holding him was displaced by her grim attentiveness to the scene before her.

Then Robert looked over at Mary Alice and, of all things, smiled. Jack took the opportunity to grab Robert's foot, sending the younger boy crashing to the ground. Jack was on him in a flash, his hands closing around Robert's neck as if they'd done so numberless times before.

Only God's grace kept Mary Alice from clutching Gabriel fatally tight in her horror.

"Jack! Stop! You'll kill him!"

Jack's face reflected a focus free of passion. The vein protruding down the center of his forehead was only a result of how hard Jack was squeezing—as was the vein protruding down the center of Robert's, whose gagging sounds soon faded into nothing.

To Mary Alice, the only movement in the world was Gabriel's heart. Jack's hands hardly seemed to be working to make this happen to Robert. And it was the strange reality of Gabriel, still alive when Robert could very well soon be dead, that shocked Mary Alice into yelling for Mother as loud as she possibly could.

The shape of her emerging from the house was like an angel descending.

"What on earth is going on?!" She grabbed Jack by the shoulders, tried to pry him off of Robert, and failed. Jack's grip was too strong.

Mother was frightened. Mary Alice was, too.

“Frank!”

When Father appeared, he and Mother worked together to pry the boys apart.

Mary Alice crouched over Robert, shaking his shoulder with one hand and cradling Gabriel with the other, calling his name, her shaking turning desperate, until Robert opened his eyes.

“Are you all right?!” Mary Alice cried.

Father was wrestling Jack inside the house. Then there were Mother’s hands on Mary Alice’s shoulders, backing her away from Robert.

“Let him breathe. What happened, Mary Alice?” Over Mary Alice’s shoulder, Mother’s face was grave and searching.

Mother was asking her for the truth, and Mary Alice could give it to her. She could tell her what Jack had tried to do to Gabriel, and what Robert had done to him for that, and how all that had ended up with what Mother and Father had seen with their own eyes. She could tell her how she knew her fear of Jack would never go away now, even though Gabriel was still alive. Which gave rise to Mary Alice’s question for Mother: why would God make somebody and forget to give them a heart?

These thoughts rushed Mary Alice’s throat and she could not figure out where to begin.

Then suddenly she had waited too long. Mother’s hands left her shoulders. Mother was crouching beside Robert and pulling him up from the ground. Mary Alice’s chin was quivering. Mother was walking Robert inside, step by careful step, her hands on his shoulders. In another

minute, Mary Alice was left alone outside Gabriel, the miracle bunny—only that wasn't what she wanted anymore.

* * *

Some weeks after the cataclysm of her first play date with Robert, Miss Berry called Mary Alice to her desk to thank her for holding to their agreement. Robert himself was outside today, probably playing crack the whip with some of the other kids.

“He’s a nice boy,” answered Mary Alice, peering up at the teacher whose class she’d have to leave too soon. Miss Berry’s pea green dress was covered with tiny pink and white flowers that reminded Mary Alice of Gabriel’s quivering nose.

Mary Alice wasn't being entirely honest. It was true that Robert had fought for her when she needed it the most, and that they'd be forever bonded for that. But outside of school, they weren't allowed to play together. In fact, because of the incident, Mary Alice wasn't allowed to have anyone over to play anymore. Jack wasn't, either, but he never tried to, anyway.

“I think he is, too, Mary Alice. Are you excited for your vacation?”

When Mary Alice's gaze fell to Miss Berry's hands, folded on her desktop, she noticed a new ring on one of her teacher's fingers. It had a diamond so tiny it looked like a crystal of the salt Mother used for pickling. Its foreignness alarmed Mary Alice.

Looking down at it, she pictured long days cooped up in the house, alone with Mother and Jack, and less of Father in the parlor since the racing season was over. She thought of Jack's bat, still in a rack on his bedroom wall, above the desk with the shiny new jar for his marbles.

Since the afternoon with Robert, Jack had mostly ignored Mary Alice, but she knew that would only last so long, just as she knew her vacation would be full of stuffy, vigilant hours of needle-point, corn shucking, and other things nice little girls should do—there was no more bunny to care for, after all.

“Who gave you that?” Mary Alice asked softly, nodding down at the new ring on Miss Berry’s finger.

When Miss Berry realized what she meant, she blushed, something Mary Alice had never seen her do before. “Oh. Well, my sweetheart gave me that.”

“I didn’t know you had a sweetheart.” Even though she knew Miss Berry having a sweetheart was the most natural thing in the world, Mary Alice felt stricken.

Miss Berry chuckled. “Well, he’s asked me to marry him.”

For the first time since Gabriel, Mary Alice wanted to cry. “Will you still be a teacher here?”

Miss Berry sighed. “Well, yes, for a little while at least. But after that, we’ll just have to see...!” For a minute she looked as faraway as a movie star on a silver screen. “But, you don’t need to worry about that, Mary Alice! Next year you’ll move up to Sister Hildegard’s class, and I know she’ll love you just as much as I do.”

But that didn’t say anything about whether Mary Alice would love Sister Hildegard as much as she did Miss Berry, and Mary Alice knew for certain already that would be impossible. The compressive intensity of their dwindling days together situated itself on Mary Alice’s chest. She needed to tell Miss Berry about Gabriel, the truth about him, before it was too late.

“Mary Alice? Are you all right?” Miss Berry’s eyebrows, thin like two light strokes from a russet fountain pen, undulated with concern.

“No!” Mary Alice burst out. “No, Miss Berry! My brother killed my bunny!” To say so suddenly cleared the haze Mary Alice had lived in in the weeks since. Tears started pouring from her eyes.

Miss Berry’s face scrunched with concern. “Well whatever do you mean, dear?”

Miss Berry reached over to rub Mary Alice’s back, which only made her cry harder. Even so, the touch made Mary Alice feel good: good in the same belly-warming way she’d felt watching Jack get punished, *and* good in the comforting way she’d felt holding Gabriel. Good in a way that she had little choice but to mistrust now. Once Jack saw her smiling, that’s where it had all started. And when he saw how she felt about Gabriel, it was as good as finished.

Still, Miss Berry’s touch gave Mary Alice the courage to explain herself, and Jack, and Robert, and Gabriel. But even at the end of all that, her teacher looked confused.

“I’m not sure I understand how your brother killed Gabriel,” she said slowly, withdrawing her hand to pass Mary Alice a clean handkerchief.

The handkerchief had Miss Berry’s same flowery scent, only now, right up against Mary Alice’s nose, it made her want to sneeze.

“My mother said bunnies are fragile,” explained Mary Alice, savoring despite herself this new word she’d learned, one that made her picture a jagged piece of glass. She deposited the handkerchief on her teacher’s desk. “She said the fight probably frightened him and hurt his heart.”

Mary Alice remembered the pain in her own heart when she'd gone to visit Gabriel the morning after the incident and found the cloud of him fallen on the grass. That morning, she'd gone to pick up Gabriel and found him heavy and stiff, even though Jack's bat had never touched a hair on his back. Gabriel's heart was still, but Hell was in Mary Alice's. And she understood then that Jack would never be able to feel whatever Hell he created. She remembered the way he'd apologized to her for scaring Gabriel and for hurting James, on Mother and Father's order, the glint in his eye, the hollowness of his hug: *Sorry, Sissy! I got carried away.*

Miss Berry frowned in sympathy. "Well, that is a shame. But I'm sure that wasn't what your brother meant to happen, Mary Alice. Sometimes little boys fight."

Mother and Father had said as much, too. When Mary Alice brought up Jack's original intentions toward Gabriel, they got stern and reminded her that her brother never actually had done anything to the bunny. *You know how your brother can be*, Mother had said.

"Jack would've killed Gabriel if Robert didn't tackle him!" Mary Alice exclaimed, pounding her fist on her teacher's desk.

Miss Berry shook her head. "No brother could really want to do that to his sister's pet. Maybe—" Miss Berry interrupted herself, shaking her head again. "Well, whatever happened, Mary Alice, I'm very sorry to hear about your bunny. Did you have a nice funeral for him at least?"

Late in the night after the morning she found Gabriel, Mary Alice was in bed and heard the back door open. Creeping to her window and peering between the curtains, she spotted Father heading to Gabriel's pen. In the moonlight he picked up her bunny by his back foot, dropped him into a brown paper sack, and rolled the top tightly down. As Father walked around to the

side of the house, Mary Alice saw him wipe at his eyes with his sleeve. Above him, Mary Alice let her tears fall.

“No,” she told Miss Berry. “We didn’t have a funeral.”

“Well I’m sure you’ll see him again in Heaven,” Miss Berry said, her eyetooth gleaming against the redness of her lips. Before Mary Alice could point out that all the sisters taught them that there was no place for animals in Heaven, the other kids started trickling back into the classroom.

“I’ll miss you, though, Mary Alice.” Miss Berry lay the back of her fingers against Mary Alice’s cheek. “You just have the sweetest little face.”

Then she sent Mary Alice back to her seat.

A Victimless Crime

There's a man's voice I don't know on the phone, asking for me by name. I was just sitting down to my stories when it started to ring, and I picked up anyway, as I always do.

"Speaking," I say, "but I'm not interested—"

"Mrs. Jacobs, this concerns your granddaughter."

"Who, Kailah?" It's involuntary: you are my only one.

"That's right. I'm here with Kailah in Niagara Falls. Kailah has been incarcerated for driving under the influence. We're at the jail now."

I'm picturing you, Kailah, cowering in some squalid cell, the type of place you couldn't have imagined before this misunderstanding—and that's what it is. It has to bet. The man is still waiting on me to say something. I wish to Heaven I could call out to your granddaddy and have him take over the call.

Instead, I just say what I'm thinking: "That doesn't sound like my grandbaby."

You sailed through high school, Kailah, where your daddy kept busy hustling and cutting up, and got into a fancy college, doing Ellis so proud. That much I do know, even though he and I weren't talking much in the years before he heard God calling him home so early.

And right now, you're supposed to be studying in Africa for the semester. What the devil would you be doing in Niagara Falls?

When I ask this of the man on the phone, he says you traveled back for a friend's wedding, which was where you ended up having too much to drink, an explanation I find just further asinine. Where would you get the money for that? But then, I don't hear much from your mother,

and I don't know that you speak much with your auntie. If there is some explanation here, maybe I just don't know about it.

"It was a victimless crime, but someone's still gotta pay," says the man on the phone. His voice is muffled, like he's speaking through a tuft of cotton. "We need bail to let her go."

You remember how you used to untangle my necklaces for me when you came over, and how I'd let you hunt the house for loose change? You'd shine the coins up with vinegar at my kitchen table whenever Ellis brought you over from out where you all moved to, out in the suburbs. I kept the coins in a jar for you in the cupboard next to the coffee. I always hoped I was teaching you something with all that.

So I need some corroboration. "Put Kailah on the phone now." I hear the receiver being handled.

"Granma I have a cold, and I've been crying a lot," you say when I say you don't sound like yourself. Your voice is muffled like the man's, thick sounding.

"And you're drunk," he butts in. It sounds like he's standing right there next to you.

"Granma, will you listen to the policeman and send the money soon?" It sounds like you're crying again now. "Then I can go home—to my hotel." You ask me not to tell anyone else until everything's settled; I'm the only one you trust with this.

"Who would I tell?" I ask, partly in sincerity, and partly as a test—but then the man's taking the phone away from you, and telling me how to send the money, and it sure didn't sound like you, Kailah, but it didn't sound entirely unlike you, either, especially if you have a cold, especially if you are drunk and afraid.

The man hangs up on me before I can ask him more questions.

The swelling music on my show tells me something shocking has just happened, but I stare through the TV, my mind telling a story of its own. I'm picturing you standing there, crying at that policeman's elbow while he barked his directions at me. And right about now you're praying that your granny was the right person to call. I have no choice but to prove you right: my duty to you, my tribute to my son.

* * *

I start getting my face on to go out, looking at my reflection without looking too close. My hair has this yellow sheen to it now, like a thin coat of amber over steel. Without your grandfather's electric razor, the bathroom vanity has felt empty. My rouge stick, purchased Lord knows when, is all dried out now.

I'm standing here mixing a smear of the rouge with some baby oil on the inside of my wrist for you, Kailah. You're my only son's only daughter, and no, it didn't sound like the Kailah I once knew on the phone, but a person can change quite a bit if you take her daddy away, send her away to school, then send her halfway across the world. And maybe you've just been around white folks so long you forgot all I tried to teach you while I could. You think you can make foolish mistakes like those friends of yours? You are wayward in a strange place. You think the world will give a thought to how good you are?

But maybe I'm a hypocrite thinking all that, and meanwhile worrying my lipliner so bad I have to take a tissue and start it over from scratch—like anyone's gonna look at me like that when I'm out putting this money together for you. But putting my face on is simply my own ver-

sion of wiping orange popsicle ooze from my children's little elbows, or pressing Darlene's hair for church: the unending work of making all of us unimpeachable. And there you are out there now, Kailah, behaving like no one ever taught you better.

These are things I often wonder if you'd understand, growing up as you did with a white mother, on a white side of town, far from all the colored faces and places your daddy grew up on. What my husband and I made for our children was something I consider very precious: a proper family with good morals, in fellowship with other diligent colored folks, caring for our own and living right. Sunday suppers, me and Les used to look at each other across the table, and he'd give me something that was, from him, a lot better than some silly old grin. He'd purse his lips like he was trying to keep the smile off his face, like it'd be too big if he let it have its way. So he shrunk it down for just him and me, the kids carrying on beneath the field of our look.

I never imagined any of us having more to do with white folks than necessary. Then Ellis exiled himself out there with them, making the two of you an island in the middle of a frothy sea.

It's a safe, quiet community, Ma, Ellis told me over the phone all those years ago. *You know that can't be said of everywhere.*

I'd never once known Ellis to act in terms of what was safe. From reselling corner store candy on the playground, to shaving off his eyebrows just to see what it would look like, Ellis always thought that he could do anything. Did you know he was the first black manager of the Macy's jewelry counter downtown? These gold earrings I'm putting in came from there. That's where he met your mama, the first white girl he ever brought home, bragging on the little write-up they did on him for the paper, I am sure. (I know I still have that clipping somewhere.)

Against my protests, including the fact that your aunt Darlene, my only child besides Ellis, was way down in Louisiana, the papers were signed. Soon enough I was out at the new house, partaking of all that safety in the flesh. Some community: folks backing their cars down the driveway to get the mail, looking down at their shoelaces instead of your eyes when you happened to cross paths—then staring at you, when they thought you weren't noticing, from across the empty street. I only remember spotting two other colored folks out there, another family like yours: black father, white mother, their daughter named something with a "C." I felt like a woman in a foreign land, Ellis playing the white neighbors like Sammy Davis. That was the home he thought you deserved.

Over the years there, you would wake up each morning with a head of untended curls, in a room stuffed with more stuffed animals, toys, and junk than any one child could begin to appreciate. None of that was a waste of money, I guess—nor you daddy's closet stuffed to the gills with shoes and clothes, so many still in their boxes or with tags still on. I think of the void he was trying in vain to fill with all that spending, where Les and I had tried to teach him the value of true sustenance.

I don't want Kailah to grow up worrying about race, Ellis would inform me on more than one occasion. How growing up around so few other black people was supposed to help, I don't know. After a few years your mama moved out, leaving you and your daddy alone in that house. I begged Ellis to sell then, but he insisted you were all established with your school, and more upheaval would be cruel.

Well, who was it that eventually ended up leaving everything she knew to go find the motherland? That's what you took to calling it in the weeks before you left. You showed me pic-

tures of the mangroves and beaches in Africa the last time I saw you, telling me how you bet that's what heaven looks like. I wonder what your daddy would have to tell us about that.

* * *

Out in the car I shut the radio off so I can concentrate on backing out of the driveway. In my purse is the paper where I wrote down the information I need to do the wire transfer, which I can get up at the Bigg's in Forest Fair Mall. You weren't even a thought when that place first opened. It was the biggest mall in the country at that time, or maybe it was the most expensive to build, all full of marble and brass and skylights. When you were big enough to ride the bumper cars and whine for soft pretzels, Ellis would bring you to meet me and Les there for the afternoon—one of the few good halfway meeting points for us.

I drive toward the highway without any trouble, hitting every green light. Doing the Western Union saves me the trouble of the bank, which is up on the right here. There they'd ask why I want to take so much money out, and your auntie's on my account now, too—so no matter how put together I look, they might give her a call down there in New Orleans, where she's spent the last twenty years, for reasons that keep on eluding me.

Not until I think to check my rearview mirror do I realize there's a police car back there, hiding past the onramp I just used to get onto the highway. I ease off the gas without even thinking about it. Then the other cars start passing me by, some of the drivers shooting me irritated looks.

They don't know what those lights flashing like our flag mean to me. They don't know about the day when you and Ellis were on your way to the movies, out there where you all lived. The police pulled him over into a restaurant parking lot, made him get out of the car, and slammed him down onto the roof of their cruiser—that's what you told me afterwards. Reasonable suspicion, the officer told me when I came to get you. Failure to signal, Ellis would tell me later that night. That, and driving a Lexus while black. They hauled him off like an animal and left you alone there crying, my grandbaby, white faces pressed against the windows of the hamburger place.

I saw them as I pulled up, after you'd been waiting there for I don't know how long. We drove away real slowly, you and me. Nice and slow, just like I'm driving now. I don't want any trouble, or should I say, any more of it.

When I finally get to the mall, the parking lot's dead. I'd pictured hoards, having to maneuver around wild children and their heedless mamas. Is there some reason I shouldn't be in the mall that no one bothered to tell me? I guess business has gone down. Then again, it is the middle of a weekday. The quiet is strange, but no crowd means one less thing for me to worry about—though your grandfather would have a fit if he saw me limping across this parking lot, no companion, not even a walker.

But I do have to look a little credible here; I should've thought to press this suit. There was a time when Ellis started pressing a fresh crease in his jeans each dark high school morning, visiting the barber religious-like every Saturday with the money he earned working at Arby's. That's when he started getting secretive—like they do around then, certainly. Except for him it wasn't about cutting class or smoking reefer, but the white girls he'd take out in our Pontiac on

summer evenings. When I found out—when a friend of mine saw my Ellis with his arm wrapped around a white girl at the movies—his defense was he just hadn't wanted me to make a big deal of it.

Is this how you want to do it, son? I asked. *Sneak around on the folks that love you the most?*

I'll always remember the way he brushed his fingers over his sparse beard, trying to look like a man frustrated with a woman. *Ma, it's 1977, not 1877.* He wasn't but sixteen and I was already starting to lose him. I made my expectations known, but in the end he was free to do as he pleased.

I pull open the mall's heavy glass door. First things first: I need an ATM. Cash is harder to trace, and I don't want Darlene knowing anything about this. I don't need her permission to love my grandbaby.

There are no babies in sight in the play area ahead of me. I look down the main corridor and see not one soul. Many of the lightbulbs overhead are out, and all of the sounds—talking, coughing, the children screaming, the shopping bags swishing, the skid of shoes on tile—all of that has been vacuumed away. Who'd have thought a place once so familiar could become so strange? Between the desertedness and the dated décor—like these colorful squiggles painted along the walls, reminding me of the paper cups everyone used a while back—I don't know whether I'm back in time, or somehow nowhere at all.

None of this changes my plan however; it can't. The mall *is* open, after all, and I came all the way out here, holding a careful fifty-five miles per hour the whole time on the highway, wary of even the slightest traffic infraction.

I head in the direction of the food court, where I dimly remember there being an ATM. All the storefronts I pass on my way are darkened. I reach the big, brass archway that marks the entrance to the food court. The sandwich shop where Les and I used to split steak subs is blacked out, along with almost every other restaurant. The only sign lit up in the whole place shows a panda bear. A young girl in a red apron stands at the counter under it. She's about your age, Kailah, looking like a girl I might pass on my way to the ladies room during church.

I take a few steps toward her, passing under the archway. She has her braids plaited into two thick pigtails that rest on her shoulders. She's looking down at the counter, down at her phone, I guess.

"Is there be an ATM around here, young lady?" Without any music piping in, my voice echoes freely across the empty court.

The girl startles, looking up.

"Oh! Um, they might've removed that." She looks around, like she hopes someone else will come and get me.

At this point I wouldn't be surprised if there wasn't another soul in this mall. Here this girl and I are, the only two in a food court that served dozens back before Ellis left us, or my husband. Before I'd learn what it means to live without them—what I'm still learning every day of this life left to me. Here I am, trying to rescue you, Grandbaby, trying to respond to your call today like I did that call of however many years ago, the police calling me to come get you.

I want to ask the Panda girl so much more: what happened to the ATM, what happened to the mall. But she doesn't want to talk to me. She's back to looking at her phone.

* * *

Would you know that the ATM is gone, just like she said? Where the machine should be is a big hole in the wall, reminding me of an empty grave. For a second I wish I could climb on into it, I'm ashamed to admit. Because what now? What's next?

Past the hole, there's a sitting area where men used to wait on their women. I pass a big janitorial mopping station on my way to go take a seat, filled with filthy water that could've been sitting there for years. The couch cushion is a whole other color after I wipe it off with a Kleenex. Then I sit to go through the rest of my pocketbook, like I'll find my answer in there.

I open my wallet, passing over the family pictures in the middle, and remember that I have my checkbook in addition to the debit card. If I don't find another ATM, a good old-fashioned check could still do in this pinch. And if Darlene asks me about the transaction, I'll just ask what business is it of hers. Seeing Les's name beside mine again on my checks reminds me of who I am and why I've come out here today. We were Lester and Glenora Jacobs, and I was so named for Glendora, Mississippi, where my mother's mother was born and raised. Did your daddy ever tell you that?

The Panda girl's gone when I pass back on my way to Bigg's. Maybe she's back there doing some cooking for her invisible crowd, because there's a new smell of rice in the air, fresh like buttered-popcorn—there was once a movie theater here, do you remember? I took you there to see *The Lion King* and you bawled your eyes out at the daddy lion's death. Dying of sadness is not completely unlike the stampede in your movie, if you think about it: a slow stampede, lasting

for years, each blow not a hoofprint, but one more lonesome day; one more disappointment, one more failure, perceived or real, doesn't matter much.

I've known such deep sadness too well at times, though I was taught that prayer could cure any ill, head, body, or heart. I taught my own children much the same. Ellis, he always had his own moods. But they got worse after that day with the police. It got so bad he wouldn't even let me see it. He started screening my calls, refusing me any hints beyond money trouble when we would speak. He cut way back on our visits, and every time I did see him, he'd become more like someone I didn't know: his swagger abandoned, his humor forced, his clothes not just wrinkled, but smelling something unfresh.

I saw, but I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to make him let me help him. Instead I racked my brain for all the wrong things I might ever have said, tacking them onto all the wrong things I'd done to drive him away from me in the first place. Where did I go wrong?

And who's that laughing at me now? Who's watching me make a fool of myself today, regret and worry wrestling like siblings for my attention? I stop in my tracks, and see them all the sudden up on the second floor of the mall: young people about your age, Kailah, or younger even. For a second they just seem like ghosts of the youth that roamed this mall when I was still coming here. Only these kids are wearing different clothes, and they are taking pictures of the empty storefronts with the cell phones they each have. Luckily they aren't paying me any mind. I hurry, hoping they won't look down over the railing, although it is nice knowing me and the Panda Express girl aren't the only ones in this place...

"Wassup, lady!"

I was about to round the corner toward Bigg's. They are about one mall equivalent of a block away from me, leaning against the glass balustrade.

"A fellow voyager of suburban decay!" another one yells down.

They sound goofy, and I don't appreciate being hollered at. But, given the strangeness of this excursion thus far, you know, I can't help but wave back.

* * *

I wish it was a surprise to find the Bigg's closed up like a tomb. Even the letters of the sign have been pried from over the entrance, leaving just the pegs and wires they once clung onto. So, no new rouge today. No Western Union. No cash, even. Meanwhile miles away you sit, my grand-baby, waiting on me. What if you're calling me right now back at the house?

Everything about that day with Ellis was about a damn phone. Did he ever explain to you about that? You and I have never discussed it, Kailah, but I know that you heard me and your daddy talking when he came to my house to get you. You were supposed to be sleeping on the couch in the living room, but I bet you were hanging on every word. It was late when Ellis sat down at my kitchen table and told me how they asked him to get out of the car, and then asked him what that bulge was in his pants pocket.

I said, that's just my phone, he told me, studying the salt shaker in his hands.

How'd you say it?

Just like that, Ma.

And then they asked to search him because it could be a gun, and Ellis decided to be a damn fool and try and reason with them, trying to explain that no way was the small rectangle in his pocket a gun, or anything else untoward, and how he and his daughter were just trying to go to the movies, and couldn't he just go ahead and show them, them cops just doing their job, couldn't he just show them his phone? With his child there in the car watching, he reached for his pocket. Next thing he knew he was breathless, metal burning my son's wrists.

Sitting on this mall bench staring at the shuttered market where we all once did our shopping together, I know they were loving every bit of it. I didn't get to the scene till everything had already happened, but I still saw it coming from the very start.

I don't know of anything more pointless than an eighty-two-year-old woman crying in frustration, but here I am.

My backup plan is to leave this mall, try for the bank by home after all, and hope I can convince them not to call Darlene. I stand up again. To my right is the exit by the play area where I first came in. But when I look to my left, way down at the end of the corridor, I'm shocked to see there's a storefront with a kid hovering outside.

When I get down there I find it's a video arcade, twin pillars marking its entryway—an old-style arcade packed with people, Kailah, all of them half-buried in a darkness shot through with color and glow, like the darkness hanging around a disco ball. I can make out a young man at the counter in there. Maybe he can help me.

Standing at the entrance, neon jumps out of the darkness along with snatches of silly melodies, jackpot sounds, imaginary cars going vroom. Strange as it sounds, it feels like I could find you in that darkness—you, or my sweet boy, late for dinner again. There was a time when

your daddy loved these kinds of games, sitting down to his cold dinner plate and massaging the meat of his hand. This was when he was in college, still living at home. He once tried to explain to me about them, those games always having to do with space invaders and extraterrestrials. And I told him—not for the first or the last time—*boy, you better get your head out of the clouds.*

Beyond the clouds, Ma, he answered, reaching over and dragging the butter dish toward him. *We're talking the stratosphere.*

The boy behind the arcade counter looks a lot like Ellis, back when he first started asking to use the car. A brownskin boy smiling, a little bit snaggletoothed. He's eating from a little tray of rice he pushes away when I step up.

"How can I help you?" His eyebrows bounce up in attentiveness. He seems nervous, his fingers playing the counter like it's a piano. The silver watch on his wrist catches a bit of electric blue light.

"Tell me, son," I begin, feeling hurried all over again. "Can you cash a check for me, for any part of the amount that I need?" I perch my purse on the countertop so he can see I'm an honest and serious woman, with state-issued ID. That I made my way to him for a good reason.

He cocks his head. "What do you mean, ma'am?"

"Y'all's ATM is out." I shake my head at myself—no time to start getting aggravated, not when I have so much ahead of me to go: get the money, get back to the car, find another Western Union. "I just need some cash. Unless there's another ATM around here."

"How much would it be?"

I suppose there's no getting around it.

"A thousand?" He leans in toward me.

I nod, and he's smiling, but still tilting his head like he couldn't have heard me right. The air is thick with giggles, frustration, and the same machine sounds punched out over and over.

"We don't really keep that much on hand. A lot of our customers are paying in change."

He coughs. "I don't mean to be rude, ma'am, but can I ask what's your situation?"

I click my tongue. "First, why don't you tell me whatever happened to this mall?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it used to always be busy in here. Now nothing's hardly open beside you all."

I'm starting to feel hot under my suit. It's just that I would sink into that queer dark beyond this sweet boy's counter if I could. All the sudden weariness threatens to take me over—in fact, I feel like I'm already dreaming. Can I really help you today? Were you right to call me? You already know how I couldn't help your daddy.

Sweet Boy's face is blending into the darkness, his voice into the noise, so I have to listen very carefully: "Well, technically it's what they call a dead mall."

"A dead mall?"

He shrugs. "People only really come for the Outdoor World. Mostly it's online shopping now. Folks find it more convenient to stay at home."

Don't I know it. "And this place?"

"Well, look, can't really replicate this on a screen." He gestured around us like this arcade was something grand. "Did you see anyone out in the mall taking pictures?"

I nod, though none of this is making much sense to me.

"People like coming here to feel nostalgic, and the arcade enhances that, so we survive. I'm proud to be the assistant manager here. I troubleshoot the machines and everything."

If only a handful of stores in this mall are up and running, why do they keep it open? I'm no entrepreneur, but it seems like a shameful waste.

"That don't make no damn sense," I murmur, ashamed of my own pugnacity, but at a loss for what else to say. Sweet Boy looks hurt, but it's too complicated to explain I meant the mall, not his pride in his work, which reminds me of my own son.

"What about my check, now?" I ask instead, getting back to business. "It's my granddaughter... I don't have a lot of time." The call from that man feels so long ago now, and this boy might as well know. I press my hands against his glass counter. "Her name is Kailah." That much I know. "She's in trouble."

Sweet Boy reels back from me, his face scrunching up in concentration, then snapping open again. "Aw, that's how I know you! You Kailah's grandma. I'm her buddy from high school, Tion! We met real quick at graduation?"

I remember the graduation, held in the auditorium of the big, well-funded school Ellis cited as a primary benefit of the suburbs. I cashed in that jar of gleaming coins in my cupboard for you and tucked the bills into an envelope with your name on it, plus an extra check from me. I sat in the row between your mother Ruth and your Aunt Darlene, the three of us pretending we weren't deep down waiting for Ellis to show up and join us, each in our own ways. Afterwards, embracing the young woman you'd become, I realized I hardly knew you. I watched your mama cry as she hugged you. I remember how you smiled and rubbed her back.

What I don't remember from that day is Sweet Boy, even though he must've been another of the few dark faces in the ceremony. I believe him, though.

"Me and Kailah still cool," he says. "When she's back in town we chill sometimes." He crosses his arms. "I been seeing her Africa posts online. You said she's in trouble?"

"Yes, she is," I answer. Before I can devise a strategy, I'm telling Sweet Boy all about the phone call and my tribulations so far.

"I never knew Kailah to be the one making dumb decisions."

Did you learn from your daddy at least, like he refused to learn from me, and keep your hands where they could see them every last second they were dealing with you?

"I just thank Jesus nobody was hurt," I tell Sweet Boy, a little tartly.

Sweet Boy's shaking his head, his big diamond earrings shimmering. "Not the driving. I'm talking about her flying back across the ocean for some wedding. Is it a friend from college, or...? Nah," he says when I shrug my shoulders. "Something's not adding up. In fact..." He looks down and pulls a cell phone out of his pants pocket, starts jabbing at it with his thumb.

"What're you getting at, now?" I feel a little woozy, now that the story's rushed out of me. Like I'd held onto a breath for too long. The countertop is now warm under my palms.

"Hold up... Yea! Look." Then he turns the glare of the phone toward me, pressing it into my hand. "You see?"

I don't. I hold the device back farther away from me. Sweet Boy reaches over and pokes it with two fingers, pushing the screen apart and making the picture bigger. That's when I see your face—you, Kailah, with braids for the first time that I recall, surrounded by shadow. You're grinning huge. You're shiny with sweat. Your earlobes are bare. You're a good shade darker than usual.

For a second I'm speechless. "Wha—where is she in that? When was this taken?" The phone in my hand is lighter than I'd expect for all it had just accomplished, dredging a photo of my grandbaby up from the void.

Sweet Boy leans across the counter to tap the phone some more. "Caption says some national park in Senegal. It's a...baobob tree?" He pans around so we see some fat branches and glossy leaves. "She is in the tree. That sucker huge!" Sweet Boy pans back up to you, zooming farther out again, and yes, I see now that you're indeed standing in the hollow trunk of one great tree.

"See, she's okay," Sweet Boy says, beaming. "Says this was posted just earlier today."

"How can I trust that thing?" I ask slowly. "I *spoke* to her."

Sweet Boy takes his phone back. "Because she's in Africa. She never left. That joker was trying to scam you. I bet whoever it was didn't say nothing about Africa till you brought it up, right? It says right here, posted today at 7:08AM—I don't know what time that would be over there. But it doesn't matter. Kailah's fine."

Well that would certainly explain your voice—the way it didn't sound a thing like you even though, again, I'm not certain I know what you'd sound like when you're sick, faraway, and in trouble. Could all this really be for nothing? Up in Niagara Falls, or wherever the hell, is there a con artist still laughing?

Sweet Boy must tell that I'm struggling. "Ma'am, I promise you it's B.S., excuse my language. Fact, I feel like I heard of that type of thing before. People preying on old—older people like that, tricking them. They just want your money. The rest is a lie."

“Well can you call her on that thing?” That’s about the only thing that would convince me for sure: hearing your voice telling me you’re all right. Then I could go on home and nurse my wounded pride in peace.

“Only if she’s online right now. You want me to see?” He goes back to his tapping. “Okay, she’s on Skype...” He holds the phone out from him so we both can see it. I can make out a little picture of you, an older one that I vaguely recognize. It pulses as Sweet Boy’s phone makes a sound like a real phone dialing.

Then, a different tone. Then your voice: “Tion...?” The clear little picture of you dissolves into blurriness, but there’s no doubt that it’s your voice.

“Kailah!” I exclaim, struggling not to snatch the phone from his hand.

“Hey, Kailah,” says Sweet Boy, stretching out the hey. “Guess who I’m standing here with,” he adds, at the same time you ask, “Is that my grandma?!”

Tion hands me the phone.

“Kailah, tell me where you are right now, baby.” Out of habit I put the phone up to my ear, and Tion reaches to guide it back in front of me. The image of you is still only the suggestion of your face, and it jerks and freezes.

“You know where I am, Grandma! I’m in Dakar. What are you doing with Tion?”

Picking up on my uncertainty, Sweet Boy leans back over the counter. “Uh, we just happened to run into each other out on the town, and we thought it’d be cool to tell you ‘hey’!”

“Um, okay.” You sound unconvinced. “Well, hey, you guys!”

“How’s Africa?” asks Tion.

“You keeping out of trouble?” I ask at the same time.

“Huh?” you say.

Tion nods to me and I repeat myself.

“Yeah, Grandma, I’m having a good time. It’s good to hear your voice, though.”

I wish I could see your face—not on this little screen, but right here in front of me. I wish I could take you in my arms and squeeze you. I can’t hardly wrap my head around talking to you on this thing, and I can’t fathom that here I’ve been thinking about you all afternoon, fitting us into a story that’s turning out to be somebody else’s.

Still, it’s good to hear your voice, too, and I tell you so.

“Listen, I’m at school right now,” you say, “so I can’t really talk.”

“That’s fine,” Sweet Boy cuts in. He takes the phone back from me, saying something about his data.

“Love you, Grandma…”

“One second, Kai!” I grab Sweet Boy’s arm and pull the phone back. “What’s this we saw, you standing in that tree?”

You giggle. “We took a trip out to the countryside! That’s how big they grow.”

“It said it’s a boobab tree?” says Sweet Boy, practically pushing his face against mine so we’re both in front of the phone.

“*Baobab*, dummy.” I can see what’s between the two of you. “They’re special here. They call them the tree of life.”

Your boy asks you more questions. I seem to have run out of words altogether, but I’m thinking of Genesis: once Adam ate of the fruit of good and evil, God feared he might also eat

from the tree of life, and live forever. Like the stratosphere: something larger than life, like Ellis always wanted. But some wanting only serves to hurt us.

For a second, all I hear is the sound of a man groaning over gunshots. Back in the arcade, I know that. Just a game. But it makes my throat catch—no, not again, no more crying. Am I not a grown woman? Is my grandbaby not just fine after all? Since when has this world had the power to shake me like I was nothing but a leaf clinging for dear life to the branch?

When you say you really do have to go now, I manage to tell you I love you, too. “Come home soon, Kailah...”

Then just like that, you’re gone again.

“That was lucky!” Sweet Boy’s got a brand new twinkle in his eye now, clear even in the dark. “See? Nothing to worry about.” He slides his phone back into his pocket. He’s smiling at me, waiting on my gratitude, when a knot of young kids appear at my elbow.

“Ooh, ma’am,” he says. “Gotta help these customers. Is there someone I can call for you, maybe?”

Like a reflex, I almost tell him “my husband”—then I want to laugh, because I might be losing it. “There isn’t anyone,” I say. “I came here on my own...” This place, of all places. What were the odds?

“Would you want to sit a minute behind the counter here?” He points to the tall chair he’s been standing in front of.

“*Spider Stompin’* stopped working again!” one of the babies whines.

“Here, ma’am...” Sweet Boy takes my hand and presses some coins into it, dull gold in the dim light. “Have a game on me. You been through enough today, you deserve it. Tell Kailah

text me when she gets home?” He disappears back into the darkness with the kids, leaving me with that gift of play money in my hand.

“It’s a fine arcade you’re running,” I call after him. I don’t think he heard, but he should know it. He’s a kind boy, smart, though cruel to leave me standing here, wondering just what the hell it is that I’m doing. Why am I not at home, watching my stories? Why didn’t I once question that phone call?

But I already know the answer to that question. I have always known that my children, and their children, and my children’s children children, would be forever in the range of relentless danger, nothing about it surprising, not even at its worst. And I have the impossible job of trying to shield them from it.

Honestly, Ellis, you’ve been lucky, I told him that night in my kitchen. *There are folks who...* I faltered. The police’s treatment of my son had me angry and rattled, but at the same time, it was the business as usual of our generations. To point out that other black folks put up with worse than what Ellis had just experienced, and on a more regular basis—which was exactly the type of life Les and I hoped our children would avoid—to say all of that right then would have felt too cruel.

They treated me like a thug over an iPhone! Ellis shoved the salt shaker away. *We’ve eaten at that damn restaurant.*

You know it could have been worse.

I said that softly, but he acted like I hadn’t spoken at all. *How could they do that to me in front of Kailah? I’ll never forget her face. I pay those pigs’ salaries.*

How could they?! I slapped the table. Ellis, listen to me. It don't matter. A Lexus don't matter. A fancy cell phone don't matter. A house twice the size of this one in their zipcode don't matter. You think you're as good as them? We tried to teach you to be even better. But you forget that a nigger's a nigger to them. You spent your life—

Don't say that word with Kailah in the other room.

Oh, you worried about the word? What about where your right mind was at when you decided to go digging in your pocket? I remember leaning forward in my seat then. You think they care that you're taking your baby to the movies? Boy, they don't care if you die on their damn watch. Of course you'll never forget her face! That's exactly what they wanted, they want you haunted. I don't know why you're trying to be one of them, Ellis.

He pushed back from the table. You never wanted us out there in the first place.

Like that's some big secret?

Well then what am I supposed to want, huh?! He was the one raising his voice then, his eyes shining. Where was I supposed to go with all them lessons, Ma? After all the hustling and scrimping and acting right? Down the street from you?

Hush now, before we say one thing too many.

I'm serious! You raised me to want...just, more.

What I wanted to tell him was, I never intended that “more” to involve leaving his family—his mother—behind.

Hush your mouth, son, I said instead. You had a long day...

And he did. And after a minute, that's when you came out, Kailah, rubbing your eyes like you'd just woken up.

The conversation was over.

Thank you for getting Kailah, Ellis said, not meeting my eyes. Sweetie, tell Grandma bye.

I'll call you when we get home okay, Ma...

I hurried up to see you both out. *Please do, son, I'll be waiting.*

I sat up by that phone till I was drooping with sleep. But I didn't call him that night, either. And that, beloved, was the beginning of the end.

So I can forgive my gullibility today: I couldn't save my son, so I was sure as hell gonna save you. And meanwhile, you were standing inside the tree of life all along, safe and sound across the Atlantic, not worrying about your grandma at all.

In the electrified darkness of this arcade, the kids move around me like schools of fish. I figure, why not kill a few more minutes playing some silly game? What in the world do I have to lose?

I see an unoccupied machine, and because its name—*Alien Syndrome*—reminds me of one your daddy would've played way back, I decide to give it a try. At least then, I can tell myself I did something with this trip to this dead mall, trying my hand at one of my wayward son's games.

I feed Sweet Boy's silly tokens into the slot on the front and take the joystick in my hand. The screen fills with what looks like a beige floorplan. There's music that sounds like the bass end of a piano struck at an ominous interval. Then there's a flat little man with a white face and a gun, who I gather is supposed to be me. When I shift the joystick, he runs. When I move him into one of these pink blobs writhing around, he falls out.

“Those are the aliens.” I sneak a glance down at the boy by my elbow: ten or eleven, freckle-faced, pale as a catfish belly. One of the kids Sweet Boy had to go help.

“I can’t touch them?” I interpret, checking back on my little man.

“No, you gotta kill them and save the hostages. Here—”

The little man shoots his gun when the boy reaches up and taps the purple button. A fleck on the screen flies and hits one of the pink blobs and it disintegrates.

“Oh, is that what you do...” I murmur.

What could be so captivating about this activity, now, I haven’t any idea. Ellis, if this was the type of thing you’d waste your time and money on, just add it to the list of things we failed to understand about each other. I never will understand how, in the years between the night you didn’t call me when you said you would and the night that you died, you took what I’d tried to teach you and contorted it all into something else. Carefulness became fear. Righteousness, bitterness. And your very pride at being who we made you just withered away. When Darlene called to tell me what you’d done to yourself, with a gun I never knew you had, Lord help me, I wasn’t surprised. Heaven help me, Ellis, I wasn’t surprised at all, though I’ve been trying to piece the reasons together ever since.

My little man is forever fighting off a threat, trying to keep the blobs away and save the other men. There is no rest until the screen starts bursting into little fireballs.

“That’s the bomb going off,” the boy explains with disappointment. “We lost.”

“Here,” I say, reaching into the pocket of my jacket and pulling out the rest of the tokens.

“I’m done playing. You have the rest.”

“I can’t,” he says, backing up, eyeing the coins like they might be the bullets. “My mom’s here to pick me up.” Looking up at me with wary eyes before turning them away.

So I collect myself to start back home, too, leaving the coins on the machine in a little stack for you.

Cloudy Waters Cast No Reflection

“I just don’t see how you expect me to believe it, Ruth,” my sister tells me, casually, like she’s saying she likes green grapes more than red. There’s a garbage bag in her hand. Dad keeps it dark in the house now, so Judith is backlit by the sliding glass door that leads out to the backyard. Her reddish-blond flyaway hairs catch the sun. It’s been so long since my sister celebrated a holiday with us, I really didn’t expect her to accept the invitation. I pitched it as a Memorial Day pool party, but nobody bothered bringing their suits.

We’re in what was once our mother’s house, cleaning up after the barbecue. The décor—floral-printed wallpaper, mustard-hued appliances, light-colored parquet floor, furniture that’s a little too big for the rooms—hasn’t changed much since we were kids.

Judith’s got trash, and I’m on dish duty. Judith’s husband Chad volunteered to scrape down the grill. My nephew Josh is out back too, probably still with his nose in his book. Josh is nine, a little younger than my daughter Kailah, who is at her dad’s family’s big annual picnic today. Per mine and Ellis’s custody agreement, this weekend happened to be his.

“Well why wouldn’t Mom reveal her spirit to me?” I ask. “I light a candle for her every Sunday.”

Reaching for the dish soap, I end up knocking it into the sink. It’s the last of the bottles of Dawn my mom had stored away, and I’ve been watering it down every time I come over to make it last. I guess I’m closer to drunk than I realized.

“What about Dad?” Judith asks.

It can be hard to look at her now. She looks more like our mom than me, petite and pretty, blue eyes.

“I guess I could light one for him, too.”

“I meant have you told him about this—visitation?” Judith says. She’s uncomfortable even saying the word. As if on cue, there’s the muffled sound of movement upstairs. Judith wipes her hand down the front of her jeans, like it’s wet or dirty. “I thought he was taking a nap.”

I shrug. “Who knows what he does...”

“Is there any trash in here?” she asks. “We wanna get going.”

“Some empty cans on the coffee table.”

I rinse the bowl we served the macaroni salad in, hoping Judith won’t notice and ask what I did with the leftovers. She made it according to mom’s recipe, but it came out way too sweet. I tried to bust her chops about it while we ate, but everyone got quiet. Then Dad excused himself to go lie down before the burgers were even on the grill. I guess being around Judith again has me on edge.

Looking over to where she stands in the den adjoining the kitchen, I see her furrow her brow.

“These should be recycled,” she says, pointing at the cans.

“No separate recycling in Colerain. We throw it all together and they separate it at the plant.”

“You believe that?” asked Judith, tying off the garbage bag and setting it on the floor. I shut the water off and settle the bowl into the dish rack. Judith’s beside me now, fishing in the drawer with the loose pull that’s crammed with plastic bags.

“Some things are hard to believe, I know,” I say.

In profile, I see my sister grimace, the corner of her thin lips curling down. She goes and starts gathering the empty Coors Lights into a beige Kroger bag, probably to take home to her own, official recycling bin in Cincinnati proper.

“And no, to answer your question,” I add. “I’m waiting for the right time.”

“Okay...what about Kailah?”

“Not yet,” I answer, my voice a little high. I’m surprised to hear Judith bring her up, since she doesn’t really know my daughter that well.

“Why’s that?” Judith asks, sitting down on the edge of the couch, the bag of cans between her knees. “Maybe she’d be more sympathetic.”

I scowl. “Our mother came to me to let us know she’s okay. Can’t I even tell you what happened? We’re her daughters.”

“Yeah, and we’re sisters.” Periodically Judith’s been saying that, as if for the record.

“And yes, she was our mother...And she’s been dead for almost a year now. She’s not coming back.”

Even though I’m the one who manages a doctors’ office for a living, Judith was better at being objective about Mom’s cancer. Maybe because she hadn’t been in touch with Mom for quite a while when she got sick. Judith tracked the cancer by the oncologist’s stats; I tracked it by Mom, her good days and bad ones, which for those months pretty much determined my own. I’d get ten singles in cashback every time I went to Kroger to light candles in the hospital chapel. Every time, I’d get on my knees and stare into the flame. Had Mom laughed since I’d last lit

one? Eaten solid food? Asked about Kailah? Then I'd cross myself and pray for the best. But if the best was a full recovery, that prospect quickly became a miracle.

"I know she's gone," I say. "I'm not an idiot, Judith. I'm saying her spirit's still around." I don't want to fight, but she doesn't get it.

"Exactly," Judith says, throwing up her hands. "You know full well that what you're telling me only works if you believe in God, spirits, all that. And you know that I don't. And if you don't know that, well, I can only assume you're still dealing with denial. That's something we've been known to deal with in this family, right?"

Her cheeks are flushed now. Her temper's getting going like it used to, even though all she's been drinking today are cans of club soda, the only non-sugary, nonalcoholic drink in the house.

"C'mon," I plea. "Calm down. I wasn't trying to get into anything."

Judith springs up from the couch, crossing the room toward me. "I'm just saying, I've never been unclear about my views," she says, grabbing a package of hot dog buns and going to shove it in the pantry. "I thought I owed you guys at least that. Even though Mom acted like..."

She can't finish the sentence, which is fair enough. Back in high school, her line used to be how Mom acted like it would kill her to listen to Judith talk about not believing in God. After she quit forcing the issue, Mom stopped having to leave the room every other time Judith opened her mouth. The two of them were always butting heads for one reason or another.

"Don't be an asshole, Judith." My voice is weak. "You know you want to believe it, too." But the thing is, I'm not so sure. I stopped understanding Judith a long time ago.

I sit down at the kitchen table and grab the bottle of squeezable mustard, like it can do something for me. “Maybe we should bring Dad a plate before we put everything away,” I say, to change the subject to something practical.

Judith turns back from the pantry with a sharp inhale. “I’m not trying to be an—asshole. Believe me. I’m glad you experienced whatever you experienced. Call it whatever you want! It’s really none of my business.”

“How can you say that? I’m trying to share this *with* you.” She’s all folded up now, stroking her own forearms like she’s soothing herself. Like this is something she has to get through, my visitation from our mom.

“What do I know about what you saw?” Judith continues. “I wasn’t there.”

I wish I didn’t notice the edge that snuck into her voice at the end there. But I did, so I look away from her, afraid of what either of us might say next if I don’t.

The pipes start gurgling as they do whenever someone flushes a toilet upstairs. Judith goes back to the couch and grabs the bag with the three empties in it. She’s moving away from me and from this conversation, on her way out of the barbecue and, hell, maybe even the family again, for all I know.

My sister has left us twice so far. First it was by way of addiction, and then again by conscious decision a few years after she recovered. As she explained in a letter she sent everyone around that time, recovery helped her realize that she needed to “take space” from the family to heal from “the past,” which in her account included some nasty accusations that the rest of us could only assume she came up with in some drunken fever dream. When I got my copy, I immediately tried calling Judith, but the number I had for her had been disconnected.

Mom wrote back for herself, me, and Dad, saying none of us could accept what Judith had written. Mom stayed in bed for a whole week after that, and we never really discussed any of it again. My sister was basically dead to us for ten years, which included my pregnancy and Kailah's birth. Right up until Mom got sick, in fact. That's what it took to get Judith to come back to us.

"Do you think Josh is having an okay time?" I ask out of desperation.

Judith sighs. "He's got his book, that's all he cares about."

"We cleaned the pool for him. You sure he doesn't want to swim?"

She smiles a little. "He was supposed to go to his friend's pool party today. I think he was relieved it got cancelled."

"Not much of a waterbug?" I ask. That's what Dad used to call us whenever we'd refuse to get out of the water. I wanted to make Judith smile more, but instead she just starts shaking her head. She looks like she just remembered she has to make an unpleasant phone call before the day is out.

"No," Judith says. Her hand's on the knob of the back door. "He's not. Listen, I'm gonna finish up out there, then we're gonna go."

"Why won't you just believe me?" I ask the mustard. Judith's already outside, the door closing behind her.

Now I don't know what to do. Part of me wants to go outside, grab another beer, and sulk. Part of me wants to confront Judith again—about the visitation, and about the way she seemed to be hinting at a comparison between her not believing me about that, and the family not

believing her letter. What she wrote about our dad was awful and ugly; what I'm trying to tell her about our mom is a blessing. Why is Judith pushing it away?

I hear the sliding door open again, but it's just my brother-in-law.

"Just bringing the griller in..." he says with a nod, practically charging toward the sink.

"Hey, Chad," I say, pushing the mustard away. I'm suddenly full of regret about the way things have been going. The better part of me knows that my job now is to keep Judith in the fold. Maybe that's what Mom's visit was supposed to remind me of. "I'm sorry about the macaroni crack."

"What's that?" he asks with a nervous laugh, squinting his eyes.

"About how it was sweet. Judy did good, really. We barely had any left over."

Spatula deposited in the sink, unwashed, Chad eyes me. "Oh! Well, I agree it was a little sweet. There was a lot left, I thought."

Under his primness, I can tell he dislikes me. He has since we met, nine years after he and Judith were married. Obviously, none of us were invited to the wedding.

"No, no," I say. "My dad ate it." The fib loosens itself from my lips before I can even think about it. "I took him up a plate."

I'm holding my breath as Chad looks at me. Then he smiles. He's decided to believe me. After all, what does he know about our dad?

With all in-laws, neighbors, church friends, and other acquaintances, Dad talked through Mom, or, Mom talked for Dad, depending on how you looked at it. Mom was the social one while Dad preferred to be in his den chair with a thick book of history or biography. Growing up, the only times I remember our dad being outgoing was when we'd have friends over. He worked

as a brand rep to grocery stores for forty years. On the weekends, he liked to quiz us kids on our favorite “products,” then reward us with gold-wrapped hard candies from his pockets.

“Well, I’m glad he liked it,” Chad says with another couple of nods, his eyes resting everywhere but on mine. Now I feel even worse. It was a white lie, but still.

Chad’s standing in the middle of the kitchen, probably wishing he still had something in his hands, something to do. Now that there’s been something nice between us, he feels obligated to keep it going.

“Well, I’m gonna see if Judith needs any more help before we go,” he says finally, his imagination coming up short. “You coming back out?”

“Yeah.” Hopefully we can still end things on a nice note.

Outside, waves of humidity emanate from the above-ground pool that hulks out past the patio. Josh is huddled up on the lone folding chair next to the grill, focused on his book. Judith stands next to the table where we ate, resting the bulging Kroger bag on it and struggling to tie it up.

“Got it, honey?” Chad asks her.

Judith’s glance between the two of us is distant. “Yeah, I got it. Are you and Josh ready?”

I butt in before he can answer. “Chad, did Judy tell you about the special thing that happened to me the other day?” That wasn’t what I’d been planning to say, but I decide to go with it. I take a seat at the table, grabbing another Coors from the cooler on the ground in the process.

From under the umbrella that shades the slightly rusty patio set, I watch Judith and Chad exchange a look. Chad’s expression is hopefully cautious; Judith’s, cautioning, even angry. I shouldn’t keep stirring the pot. But maybe Chad can help me get through to her.

“Uh...no,” he answers, rubbing the back of his neck. “What’s that?”

Judith tosses her bag of cans on the ground with more force than necessary. “Ruth claims my mother’s spirit visited her.”

Chad frowns, blinks, and nods, as if to express that he’s impressed, but somehow neutral at the same time.

Across the patio, Josh lowers his book for the first time since he scarfed down his cheeseburger. No waterbug, and not much of a talker, either. Every so often, though, he’s been calling out a fact from his big book of unbelievable facts, addressing Judith every time: “Mom, did you know farmers used to put calf brains in milk to make it thicker?” “Mom, did you know butterflies will eat rotting corpses?” The sort of stuff Kailah would get a kick out of, too.

Since Josh did not attend our mother’s funeral, he and Kailah have never met. Not for the first time today, I try and imagine what she’s doing right now with Ellis. If they have a bouncy house this year, or slip ’n’ slides. Which of the grandparents and great aunts and uncles are winning at spades. Who’s taking home the biggest pile of change.

Josh doesn’t break the silence now like Kailah would. No one does until Chad finally offers: “You don’t say!”

Judith’s eyes bore into him.

“I do,” I respond. “And look, I realize you guys don’t go to church or anything like that. Chad, I don’t know your exact views, but Judy’s been very open about her atheism all along.” All three of them are looking at me now, Josh with open fascination. “But look. I’m serious when I say, what I’m trying to talk about isn’t really about all that. It’s about a real thing that happened.”

Chad reaches over and touches Judith’s elbow.

“A spiritual thing, sure,” I say, forcing myself to continue, “but we can all relate to that feeling of awe. You don’t have to be Catholic or even believe in God to know what awe feels like, right? So why are you making it about that when it’s about us being sisters—”

Judith tries to interrupt: “Hey, I’m not the one who—”

“—and this awesome thing that happened to one of us,” I continue, raising my voice, “that we can share? Don’t you see? This means Mom’s still around, guiding us.”

Obviously I’m just talking to Judith now. I might not like how I sound, but I’m saying what I need to. Around us the cicadas swell, then fall back into silence. My sister’s hand is cupped over her eyes, her not negligible engagement ring sparkling in the late afternoon sun. She looks glamorous and dramatic, but she sounds strained when she speaks.

“You mean she’s in heaven? Whatever you say. Look, Ruth, I really don’t want to talk about this anymore. Okay?” She uncovers her eyes. “Go up and tell Robert about it. I’m sure he’ll love it. We’re gonna go now.”

“So you’ve said. Is it some kind of obligation, being here?”

Judith laughs a halting laugh. “Well yes, frankly. Can’t say we’re here for the pleasure.”

“That’s nice. Nice example to set for your kid.”

“I prefer not to lie to him.”

“Oh, what, like I lie to Kailah?”

Judith looks confused. “I didn’t say that. I have no idea what you tell Kailah. About anything.”

That provocation was off-base, I can’t lie. But I’m getting pissed again.

“Right,” I say, like I’m proving something. “You don’t.” Everyone’s quiet for a minute. “I feel like this family’s falling apart without Mom,” I say, squeezing my Coors can to get the words out. I feel like an overgrown kid with a swiped beer. It even tastes sort of gross all the sudden, but I slurp anyway.

Judith’s voice is low and pained. “This family has been in pieces a long time as far as I’m concerned. I’m sorry.” Chad and Josh come to stand with her. “We’re leaving,” she says for the third time, reaching for Chad’s hand and finding it without looking down.

The three of them peer down at me until I get up, letting Judith pull me into a hug.

“I do miss her, too,” she murmurs in my ear. “Despite everything…”

When she draws back from me, her face is contorted, like it hurt her to have said that. And it’s like looking into a mirror, because I’m hurting that she said it, too. I remember all our trips to Sears with Mom growing up, the trips to the Creamy Whip afterwards.

“Then why don’t you want to know what happened?” I ask. “When Mom visited me?”

“Jesus, Ruth!” Judith gives a violent shrug and throws my hands off her. Between that and the abuse of God’s name next to my own, I feel stricken. “You really wanna get into this? Because we can.”

“Yes!” I say. “Please!”

“Fine!” Judith claps her hands together. “The truth is, I find it totally mysterious, the way you want to remember her. Like she was the world’s greatest mother. Like she didn’t hang you out to dry, too. Forget my shit, as I know you’re more than happy to do.” Behind her, Chad looks dismayed. He says her name, but Judith steams ahead. “What about the fact that she didn’t speak to you the whole time you were pregnant? What about that?”

Like I'm outside my own body, I see myself take a step back from her, see Judith standing there, triumphant and furious.

"That's not true..." My voice is rough. Things are starting to move too fast.

"Yes, it is! Should I show you her letters? Why would she lie to me about that? Why would I lie to you now?"

Just behind the glass door that glares in the sun behind Judith is the living room where I told my parents I was pregnant—my bills paid up, sure, but my ring finger just as bare as it is now. Daddy listened to me, even after I explained that the baby would be half black. Even after Mom got up and left the room like she was leaving a room with no one else in it.

But Judith wasn't around for any of that. That was after she sent her awful letter and left us behind.

"Mom was writing you then?" I ask, sounding as dumb as I feel.

"Honey," Chad says, taking Judith's arm again, "is this what you want to do?"

But her eyes aren't leaving me, even as I sink back down to my chair.

"She wrote me, yeah." My sister is sneering. "Begging me to forget the things I said and come back to the family. 'I've forgiven Ruth. I can forgive you, too.'" Judith's eyes fill with tears. Then she turns to Chad. "You two go wait for me in the car. Please."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

A mask of duty replaces Chad's concern. He takes Josh by the shoulders and maneuvers him to the glass door, and they disappear into the house.

Silently, Judith takes the chair across from me and we stare each other down. There are deep crow's feet around her eyes, though she isn't smiling.

"Do not think," she says finally, "that just because I'm here now, it means I have forgotten the past. *My* past. You can remember yours however you want. Doesn't make a shred of difference to what I know in my bones."

"Mom came around," I say, shaking my head. It was a lot to ask of her. I always knew that. Mom grew up in a very different world than me or Kailah. "She was a good grandma to Kailah." My daughter has always been closer to Ellis's mother, sure, but that's just the way things shook out.

"I'm happy to hear that!" Judith exclaims. "Was she a good mother to me?" She taps at her chest with all ten of her fingertips, like I might not be sure which "me" she means. "Were they good parents, Ruth? Because in my book," her voice cracks a little, "good people don't do the kind of shit they did."

It's like I'm on the witness stand, with Judith prosecuting. But instead of swearing me in on a Bible, I'm laying my hand on one of our old family albums filled with pictures of my parents' wedding. Pictures from pool party summers, the trays of ants-on-a-log and cheese and crackers Mom would bring out for us. A picture of us Caesar's Creek, Dad carrying Judith after she slipped and gashed her knee, the strawberry-shaped bloodstain it left on his shirt. A picture of Kailah's birth, and of Mom holding her after—she surprised me at the hospital that day. Through the haze of the epidural, I thought she was an angel at first.

I have to push through the mist of memory to say what I know I have to say. But even as I do—“They’ve always been there”—I’m terrified to realize that I feel lost. Unsure, for the first time, of this thing I’m defending.

Judith reaches over to squeeze my hand, shocking me. Her touch is surprisingly cool.

“No, Ruth,” she says, looking me square in the eye. “Our father abused me. Mom was an enabler. And a bigot. Don’t tell me Kailah changed everything for her. We both grew up in the same house. I mean, do you think our parents even actually loved each other?”

“Of course they did!” I snap. This feels like the easiest thing to fight her on—and I guess, despite our touching hands, I do still want to fight. “They knew each other since they were in second grade. How can you even say that?”

“Jesus...” she says again, sounding sad this time. Judith starts shaking her head, speaking flatly, like she would to an ornery child. “Ruth. Can you please explain why you are so committed to this fairytale about our family? What do you even gain?”

Exactly everything you lost, I want to tell her. Holidays. Babysitting. Shopping trips and movies and lunches. Mom’s friendship; Dad’s advice. Not feeling lost. Not feeling alone.

“He never did anything like that to me,” I say stonily. “Or to Kailah.” I can’t tell whose hand is squeezing tighter, mine or Judith’s.

“Are you sure?” Judith says. “Do you realize how hard it was for me to remember?”

I press on. “Look, I wasn’t there when... You know, we had our separate bedrooms. So I just can’t—”

Judith raises her free hand in a stop sign. “I know, I know, you can’t pick sides.” That’s what I told her the last time we talked about this, in the sitting area near Mom’s room at the hos-

pital. “I actually remember that, thanks. But you know what, Ruth? Fuck it. My concern now is Kailah.” She looks me so frankly in the eye I feel a little spooked. “Are you positive he’s never done anything?”

I wince. To me, this is like staring straight into the sun: something you just shouldn’t do, or it might permanently alter the way you see. Of course, even if I can’t believe Judith...I’d have to be a fool to not even wonder about my own daughter. I would have to be a fool, or something even worse.

The sound of the back door sliding open startles us both. Judith’s hand abandons mine so she can turn and watch her husband and son emerge from the darkness of the house. Josh breaks away from his dad and scurries back to the folding chair.

“Look who we found on our way out,” Chad says, eyebrows lifted, smile tight. Then he steps aside to reveal our dad.

Dad’s eyes are watery as he steps into the light. I can tell even though the bill of his Reds cap shades them. His shirt is buttoned to the very top. He has a pair of navy blue swim trunks draped over his arm. Dad looks at Judith, then at me, then at Josh, who’s back to his book already.

“Feeling a little better,” Dad says, “after my nap.”

“Good!” Judith practically barks. Then, “Joshy, why don’t you let Granddad have that chair and you come over here, next to me. Hon,” she says to Chad, “did you tell Dad we’re on our way out?” When Josh comes to stand beside her chair, she clamps him to her side with an arm around his belly.

“He knows,” says Chad.

Between the heat, the beer, and my and Judith's aborted discussion, I feel nauseous. Dad's timing couldn't be worse. I look over at my sister, but she's fussing with Josh, picking at fuzz on his shirt till he whines, "Mom!" She won't return my gaze, so I look at our dad.

His head is near totally bald now. His neck's ropier than I picture when I think of him, and he looks weathered against his white shirt. Dad's starting to slim down, too, and not even just physically. Without Mom, he seems like half his old size in every way. He looks almost like a kid sitting there in Josh's chair, his legs skinny and pale in his khaki shorts.

He smiles at me.

"You going swimming, Dad?" I ask quietly.

"No, no. I dug these up for Josh...in case he wanted to get in the pool." Dad lets the old trunks unfurl like a banner. "They'll be a little big. But there's the drawstring."

Chad looks over at Judith. "That's nice of you, Bert, but..."

"Oh no," says Judith, a little frantically. "Oh, no. There's no way those would fit. And as we said, we're on our way out."

I can understand why she's acting the way she is. Logically, I can. But I don't want to; I don't want to feel it. I don't want to believe it.

My eyes fall from Judith's face to my nephew's. Behind his square-framed glasses, Josh looks deeply perplexed. There's the slightest hint of a grin pulling at his lips, but it reminds me of the smile Kailah wears when she wants to look braver than she feels. I don't want him to be afraid of us. We're not scary people. We're not bad.

"Josh is more of a reader. Like you, Dad," I say, like I know anything about the kid. Just talking. Just saying things, and thinking about another beer.

Finally, Judith looks at me again. Her front teeth are sinking into her lower lip. She's nodding her head in nods so small, probably only I can see them. Only I know what she's saying yes to. *Yes*, she's saying to the weakness she's always suspected of me. *Yes, that's right*.

It sounds dramatic, and maybe I'm just imagining it, but something in Judith's eyes says she's decided she's lost me forever.

Across the patio, Dad lays the trunks over the arm of his chair with a shrug. "It's a shame," he says. "You all were such waterbugs..."

"You hungry, Dad? Want some food?" I ask him, more out of nerves than anything.

"Haven't had anything but coffee today," he admits, "but damned if I've got any appetite these days..."

From where he's still standing in the middle of the patio, Chad shoots me the briefest look of disapproval.

Dad goes on, blinking at Judith and Chad like a little baby in the sunlight. "You all can't go yet, Judy. Can you?"

Judith reaches up and ruffles Josh's hair in a twitch-like movement, but when she speaks, her voice is smooth. "Actually, Dad," she says. The "Dad" is practically in italics, but she's still looking at me. "Ruth was about to share something special with us, before we go."

Dad shifts in his chair. "Oh?"

"That's right," says Judith. "A spiritual experience she had. Concerning Mom."

My mouth goes dry.

"Please?" Dad leans forward.

"A spiritual experience!" Judith repeats. "About our mother."

“I don’t know, Judith,” Chad says, looking pained. “The dog...”

“He’ll be fine. Just one more second,” Judith says, jutting her chin at me. “It seems like this might be the moment for Ruth to tell us the full story. Let’s hear it, Ruth. You have an eager audience.”

She’s trying to punish me for not being able to believe her. She’s giving me a dose of my own medicine—and at the same time, giving me the hearing she never really had.

I could tell her no, my sister. Her arm is still seatbelted around Josh, but now he’s pulling away from her to get a good look at Judith. As he takes in the contempt blazing in her last remark, Josh’s disbelief breaks into distress, and all the sudden, too. Like a baby bird cracking the eggshell open from the inside. This is not the mother he’s always known.

“Mom,” Josh demands finally, sounding to my surprise more angry than upset. “What’s going on?” He’s mad like only a kid betrayed can be.

Judith turns to him, shifting to her most nonchalant tone without missing a beat. “Nothing, honey,” she says. “Aunt Ruth’s going to tell her story, then we’ll go home.”

Chad moves to stand behind his family, encompassing them with the freckled drape of his arms. The only ones untouched are me and Dad, who’s studying me from across the patio.

“Ruthie?” he says.

I guzzle the rest of my beer. No getting out of it now.

“Well...” I begin, my eyes flicking everywhere but Judith or Dad: Chad’s faraway look, a watermelon seed on the patio cement, the ladder to the pool, the book Josh is holding—*Ripley’s*, I see, before the title disappears under his arm. “It was Mom. Mom came to me. And I know not everyone here is religious. So, I guess you can take what I have to say with a grain of salt...”

“What happened?” asks Josh, a small voice arising from within the frame of his parents.

I take a deep breath. Out of everyone here, it seems easiest to address this to my nephew. He doesn't know about any of the family history, the ugliness or the doubt. He just knows I'm telling him something important.

“Well. It was early in the morning, before work. And I had the radio on. And then a song by one of your grandma's favorite bands came on. The Mamas and the Papas. You know them yet? ‘*Young girls are coming to the canyon,*’” I sing, “‘*and in the mornings I can see them walking...*’” Josh's blank face doesn't surprise me. “Anyway, whenever I hear their music, I think about Mom—Grandma.”

Josh is interested. Focusing on him, his parents fade into the slightly blurred edges of my vision. I'm too shy to check Dad's reaction so far.

“So that was one thing. And when I sit at my table, I sit facing a window. So, at the same second I realized what song was playing, a bird flew by outside. It looked like a dove. And not a mourning dove, but an actual, white dove. I don't know about you, but I've never seen one of those just flying around before. Not around my house, at least.”

Josh shakes his head no in agreement. Everyone's quiet a minute, including me.

Then Josh asks, “Was that it?”

Judith presses her lips against his curls.

I sigh. “No. But the next part's harder to explain. And maybe not everyone will believe it.” The words feel thick in my throat. “But...I know what happened. What it was, was I felt my mother's spirit. Her presence. You know how you can feel when someone else is in the room with you, even if you can't see them?”

Josh nods, smiling a little. For the first time, I realize how much he looks like Judith did at his age. Is that what it would have felt like to her? With Dad, I mean. Like he was in the room with her, and she felt it, but no proof?

“Well...it was like that,” I go on, nodding my head. “It’s like Grandma came into the room, even though I couldn’t see her. Like I could smell her smell—even though I didn’t, exactly.” Then I make myself say the last thing, the part I know will sound the most far-fetched to them. “Then...it felt like Mom was talking to me—like I could hear her, inside my head, telling me everything was okay.”

Josh wrinkles his nose. “You mean you heard her voice?”

The thing is, it was beyond anything as straightforward as that. There was just the dove, the song, and Mom’s words that I heard less with my ears and more with my heart. And all of that came with a feeling of profound and undebatable certainty. A feeling that, between me and God, made perfect sense.

I don’t know if I can translate that well enough to make them understand—but I need Josh to believe me. So I just tell him yes.

“Can you believe that?” I ask him, leaning forward a little.

Only now, Josh looks at Judith for guidance. My sister wipes an angry tear from her cheek. The rest of her face is set.

Silence again, lasting practically forever.

“Well, Dad,” Judith says finally, turning to look at him, her voice empty and weary as all time. Our dad looks no different than he did when he was waiting for me to start telling my story.

“Can *you* believe that?”

Now he looks caught off guard, like a daydreaming kid getting called on in class.

“Well, sure,” he says a little gruffly, blinking, nodding. “Sure, I believe it.”

“Mom wanted us to know she’s okay. Isn’t it great, Daddy?” I ask. I don’t call him that often, but right now I need to. I know Judith must hate me. But I need this. I need to know he believes me. I need to know he cares.

But the thing is, he doesn’t. This hits me with the way his lips stretch uncomfortably over his teeth. “Yeah,” he says, nodding. He seems neither relieved nor touched. “That’s really something...” Nothing else, no other input.

“Well, Ruth, thanks for sharing that.” Judith’s voice is tight. “You feel better now that we all know?”

The answer is no, and Judith already knows it; in a way she’s known it for years.

Across the patio, Dad fiddles with the drawstring of the rejected trunks. Judith won’t look at me anymore, and Chad and Josh are focused on her. I feel nauseated to the point of possibly vomiting—but I won’t let myself, not in front of everyone. There’s only one thing to do.

I stand up, crumple my empty beer can, and drop it to my feet. Then I go climb the ladder up to my parents’ pool.

I don’t care if no one else wants to swim. Or that the water I just cleaned for today is already covered in someone else’s Memorial Day grass trimmings, blown over by the wind. I can’t see my reflection, standing there at the edge. And as I sink in, dress still on, the water weights my limbs and clears my mind. There’s nobody calling to me from the patio. The coldness breaking like slaps all over my body, the chlorine filling my nostrils, the thick silence surrounding my ears, this whole day could have just been a dream.

* * *

When I wake up, I'm lying on the inflatable pool lounge, which I apparently managed to get myself onto after doing a dead man's float as long as my lungs would allow. By the time I climb back out of the pool, Judith, Josh, and Chad are long gone. The Kroger bag full of cans is still out on the patio, along with the can I crushed and dropped.

Inside, Dad is heating up some Campbell's beef and vegetable on the stove.

"You have a good swim?" he asks over his shoulder, ladling the soup into a mug. I can't tell if he's kidding, serious, or if he even cares.

"Very refreshing," I lie. My head hurts and I'm parched, my dress still soaking wet in patches. He doesn't say anything more about the visitation, so I don't either. "Thanks for hosting, Dad," I tell him on my way out. "Call me if you need anything."

When I get home, I see I have an email from Judith instructing me not to bother inviting her family to any future gatherings. It hurts so much, I delete it on sight.

Not long after, Kailah calls me, like she still does religiously when she's with Ellis—although after today, I have this sinking feeling that this won't always be the case. That some day, at some point in the future, she'll size me up and find me wanting.

But today at Ellis's family picnic, Kailah's uncle Calvin won the pot. My former mother-in-law Glenora sent me her regards. They did a croquet course this year, for something different, and all the little cousins kept trying to collect the pretty balls.

“They thought they were Easter eggs,” Kailah interprets, sounding superior. And, she tried a pig’s foot for the first time. “I liked how it tasted,” she says, “but I didn’t swallow it.”

After my daughter finishes telling me about her Memorial Day, I decide to tell her about the visitation, sitting at the same table where it happened, looking out the same window. It’s the full story this time, including what exactly I heard in my heart after the dove flew by: *All is well*, is what I’d felt-heard, clear as a bell. My mother letting me know this, against all the evidence to the contrary.

I cry a little telling this to Kailah. There’s no dove outside my window tonight, just the complex’s half-empty parking lot. Still, my daughter accepts my words like a thirsty flower. I can trust her with this, just like she trusts me.

“I miss Grandma, too,” she tells me in her brave, serious voice.

“She was a good grandma,” I say finally, on a long exhale, like I’m blowing out a candle. My head throbs along with my heart, along with my fingertips against the phone. “Grandpa missed you today, too,” I add to my own surprise.

My daughter is quiet. It’s been such a long day, I can’t tell if it’s a silence of reverence, or a silence of her hoping to say more. And the truth is, I don’t have the strength tonight to ask her what she’s thinking.

So I tell Kailah I’m tired and I have to go. “But I love you more than anything,” I say. It’s our customary sign-off.

“I know. Okay. But, did Aunt Judith and Josh and Uncle Chad come to the barbecue?”

I itch under my soaking bra and underwear. I have the sudden urge to tear everything off.

“Nope,” I say instead. Down in the parking lot, a couple is strapping their child into its carseat. “They didn’t end up showing.”

“I’m sorry, Mommy,” Kailah answers, in that same grownup voice. “I know you wanted everyone to be together.”

“I know, sweetie.” The family drives off. “Maybe next year.”

I can’t believe myself.

A Sunny Sky To Lay It Out Under

According to its stub article on Wikipedia, Rodney, Mississippi, is a former city, but back in slavery times, it was a river town. The river meant jobs, and when it seemed like Rodney would be a fashionable place, the capital of the Mississippi territory, even, fashionable people started coming through to leave their mark—presumably with their legally owned black humans in tow.

But the Mississippi made fools of them all. When the river started shifting its course, Rodney was left high and dry. By the Civil War the town was becoming obscure; in 1869, a fire sealed the deal. Rodney's bright future burned out, just like that.

When my now ex-girlfriend, Georgia Siekmann, suggested we go away for the weekend, Rodney, Mississippi, was not what I had in mind. Indeed, Siekmann originally pitched our first trip together as a scavenger hunt for Mississippi Blues Trail markers, plus a night in Jackson.

Siekmann picked me up from my apartment bright and early yesterday morning. I moved in there about a year ago, after separating from the first person I ever came out to: the man I lived with for nineteen years in a gold-painted camelback he inherited from his grandmother, my ex-husband, Jermaine. Our chemistry was always more of a friendly duet than a torch song, and it took me years to wake up to the half-lives we were living. We may have danced to Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell at our wedding, but it wasn't ever gonna be the real thing.

I remember flipping past that song in the jukebox the night I met Siekmann, three months ago. It was dyke night at a bar in the Marigny, in commemoration of the actual dyke bars that once dotted those blocks. I learned that history from Siekmann herself after she stepped to me, the only solo sister in the place, and asked if she could buy me a drink.

“Maybe I’m more of a lover than a wife,” Siekmann had said a ways into our conversation, after we’d covered the basics of our relational histories. She had a youthful energy I found energizing. She looked good in her shined up wingtips with the matte red lipstick, and when she smiled cocky, good tipped over into fine. I could smell the mix of vodka and minty gum on her breath. I was feeling myself in my fancy slacks, my kinky curls cut into a fresh halo, my edges expertly laid.

I wanted her pressed against me.

“Maybe I am, too,” I said, moving closer and thinking, *Shoot, what the hell?*, the pieces of my former life scattered to the wind at my back. She was white, but she was hot, and I was free.

Flashforward to the drive to Natchez, the location of our first blues marker. Our conversation seemed to range along the deep-earthed farmland surrounding us, and Siekmann remembered my love of cinnamon sugar pita chips and Bessie Smith for the ride.

So I might have been stroking her leg, Bessie’s voice groaning in our ears from all around, when we blew a flat, Siekmann’s car starting to fishtail all over the two lanes of the highway.

One call to AAA, one tow truck ride to the crusty garage, and one two-inch-long nail extraction later, our plans changed. The mechanics would get to our car by that night, but no earlier than six o’clock; Siekmann suggested spending the night in Natchez instead so we wouldn’t be rushing to get to Jackson.

Issues on one of the oil platforms she managed was making work stressful for her lately, and she wanted this trip to be low-key. I doubt it helped that all of Siekmann’s colleagues knew

her by her given name, though I didn't mention that just then. Unlike Siekmann, Georgia was straight, though perpetually single; unlike Georgia, Siekmann had been in a string of medium- to long-term relationships over the course of her life, every one of them with another woman. Siekmann, when in a certain mood, would explain further distinctions between the two, most of them boiling down to Siekmann's freedom and Georgia's dullness. They were opposites in her mind, but in mine they both were anchored by the body of the first woman I ever woke up naked beside for more than one night in a row. (I may not have been out of the closet for long, but I been busy.)

Anyway, I agreed we should stay in Natchez, though the afternoon spent milling around gimmicky shops hawking folk art and Confederate nostalgia confirmed my instinctual reservation.

For dinner, we chose the Italian restaurant downtown, Siekmann looking suave in her slacks and dove-grey blouse while we walked over in the humid twilight. We'd both changed at the Victorian-style bed and breakfast where we'd managed to find a room stuffed with doilies, busts, and porcelain-faced dolls, plus a feather-haired hostess who acted like us two grownass women were sharing a room just to save a little money.

But right then, with Siekmann holding the door for me at the restaurant, the smells of garlic and warm bread wafting out of it, I thought the trip might turn out okay.

I was on my second lukewarm breadstick when Siekmann popped the question.

"Just hear me out," she began, swirling her glass of chardonnay, "and if it doesn't appeal, we don't have to do it."

Tell me why the first thing that popped into my head was a secret suitcase full of sex toys. “Go on...” All irritation aside, I was ready for a nasty night in Natchez.

“Well, we’re right by this town my coworker told me about once,” Siekmann said, far too carefully for me not to start getting skeptical (and disappointed). “It’s called Rodney. It’s a ghost town, basically—a Confederate ghost town.” She snuck a guilty look at my face. She was nervous even saying that word to me, and she was working up to asking if we could go there?

“Behind some university to the north of here,” she continued, “way down this dirt road and stuff. No one really knows about it, it’s a word-of-mouth type of thing. And the ruins are supposed to be—striking.” She explained about the river and all that, till the server interrupted with our food.

“Anyway,” Siekmann continued over her chicken, “I just was wondering if—”

“If we could swing by there tomorrow?” I speared a ravioli.

“Well, yeah! What do you think?”

“I think that the hideous décor at our bed and breakfast is more than enough time-traveling for me. I have no interest in visiting a shrine to any town where people like me were property. What makes you think that I would?”

She cringed. “I know—God. Of course. That’s not all it is, but it is totally that. But—”

“I can’t say I know what ‘all’ it is,” I interrupted, “but a monument to slavery is all it is to me, and that’s more than enough.” Dealing with students demanding to register for this class or the other at Southern has lent me superwoman patience over the years, but she’d just pissed me off.

Siekmann set her fork down. “I’m sorry, Darlene. I didn’t mean to be insensitive. I

just—well, it would've felt dishonest to not bring it up. I didn't wanna hold things back, y'-know? I thought we were both over relationships like that. And," Siekmann dared go on, "well, because of the scenery and everything, I thought Rodney could be an interesting place for you to take some pictures."

So, besides our common age group, geographical location, and sexual orientation, one of the things that sustained me and Siekmann beyond a handful of dates were our mutually neglected artistic leanings. Sometimes after sex, we'd fantasize about visiting the structures of the world that she wanted most to see, with me capturing their beauty on film. Siekmann had switched to engineering after she demonstrated little aptitude for the design aspect of architectural design; I had minored in art as an undergraduate at Xavier while earning my degree in communications. Before long I was telling Siekmann about the old Minolta camera that had lived at the back of mine and Jermaine's closet till I stopped thinking about it.

Many of my personal things are still sitting in boxes in my apartment. I came across the Minolta while looking for my prescription sunglasses to bring on the trip and decided to bring it along, figuring the Blues Trail signs would offer some low pressure photo ops.

So as much as I hated to admit it, Siekmann's new angle was getting her somewhere: Rodney did sound like a more compelling subject than some sun-bleached informational plaques. And with the camera in my hands, I'd be able to tell my own story about the place, no matter what we ended up finding there.

Siekmann could tell I was entertaining it. "But again," she said, "I more than understand if you're not interested. I could always just get up early and go myself."

I clicked my tongue. "It's that important to you?"

“Why not, if we’re here? But honestly, I would rather go with you. I mean, don’t you think it’s important that we can talk about this stuff?”

Just then, the waiter came back to ask us if everything was tasting good.

On our walk back to the bed and breakfast, Siekmann would describe her chicken as rubbery—but right then, she looked that man in his eyes and said, with some feeling: “It’s fantastic, thank you.”

I didn’t have to lie, since he barely looked at me anyway.

“So’re you gals just in Natchez for the weekend...?” he asked, pinching the bottom of the wine bottle while he poured Siekmann a second glass.

“That’s right,” she said, giving me a wink. “Do you have suggestions for interesting sightseeing?”

The waiter twisted the bottle in the air to finish off the pour. “Have you heard of the Windsor Ruins?”

Siekmann and I traded a look. “No,” she said.

“They’re about forty miles from here—the ruins of the Windsor Plantation.” He had no problem looking right at me as he said that. “All that’s left are the original pillars. Reminds me of Stonehenge or something.”

That was it.

“Sounds magical,” I said with a corny grin. “We gotta be sure to stop by those pillars on our way out, booboo.” Just to be extra extra, I reached over and squeezed Siekmann’s hand that was laying on the table.

I glanced between the waiter's fading smile and Siekmann's flushing cheeks. She was typically cagey about PDA around New Orleans; I just thought being almost two hundred miles from anyone she was guaranteed to know would loosen her up.

"Anything else I can get you ladies for now?" the waiter asked, opting to ignore the fact that I'd spoken. He backed away, clearly praying that the answer would be no.

This time Siekmann waited for me to start once the man had left us in peace.

"By the way, I was serious," I said after a few bites of pasta. And as I said it, I knew myself that it was true.

"Was that necessary?" Siekmann shot back, ignoring the bait.

Not long after we met, she'd explained that it was hard enough being the only female team lead in her division for the past fifteen years, and she knew better than to court trouble by adding "lesbian" to that moniker. Part of me understood, but part of me knew too well the cost of a life half lived.

"Forget the waiter. I said I'm serious!"

"You don't wanna go to Rodney, but you'll go to some plantation ruins?" Siekmann sipped at her wine to hide the start of a grin.

"Why don't we both do both?" My mouth was getting away from me and I wasn't even drinking. I felt frisky after messing with the waiter—a reflection of my mentality in general since embarking on my new life. For the first time ever, I was learning what it meant to truly not give a fuck what others thought of me.

"I didn't peg you for the type to change course so easily," Siekmann said. "Is this a test?"

"If that's the way you want to think of it."

“I guess that makes you the professor.”

“I guess you’re right.”

Holding her gaze, I wondered if all this was an emotional investment I wanted to make. More than once I’d warned Siekmann that she and I were about enjoying ourselves, not getting serious; more than once I’d wondered about the stories behind her many relationships. Even so, part of me missed the comforts of deep partnership, a missing that only seemed to grow louder as Siekmann and I had started aging out of the fling stage. I was captivated by the concept of a relationship built on companionship *and* mutual desire.

“So, why the sudden change of heart?” Siekmann asked, more earnest now. Then she took her lips (soft, coconut-scented, full for a white lady) and tugged at the rim of her glass with them, the skin of her neck exposed as she tilted her head back to drink.

On the other hand, I wasn’t looking to break up right away, either.

“You made a cogent point just now about us being able to talk. About racism, I mean.” I glanced down at my plate. It felt vaguely like I was trying to speak a foreign language. “Like, deal with it between us, whatever that may entail. It’s essential, and we’ve kind of been avoiding it.”

“I thought it was just that racism falls out of the realm of ‘fun and easy,’” she said, trying not to look too excited. “Is this about us getting more serious?”

I raised an eyebrow. “This is about me getting through this trip with my integrity intact. I want to go see these places with you, but I do have conditions. Same applies to our relationship in general. I won’t be spending any time in the Sunken Place.”

“Huh?”

I made a mental note to rent *Get Out* for us when we got back. “I’m saying I’ll be damned if I trade in one half-life for another one.”

“So talking about racism gives you life?” Siekmann was grinning at her use of Millennial vernacular, but she also seemed genuinely unsure of what I meant.

It was gradually dawning on me that I had no experience talking about racism with white people in any real way. In my parents’ house, the very idea would have been met with ridicule tempered by a sincere concern for the dreamer’s right mind (so when my late brother Ellis started going with white girls and white girls only, you can imagine how well that went over). I have no close white friends and I cap all of my professional relationships at courteous. I had listened to white folks talk about racism to me, but never bothered saying much in return. So I was no professor actually, despite Siekmann’s remark.

I could tell she was tipsy, so I decided to be merciful. “Not exactly. What gives me life is being able to share a common understanding of reality with the person I’m with. Not identical, but common. Jermaine and I had that in some ways and not in others. Obviously.” I opened my arm over the table, indicating the existence of our date.

Siekmann smiled. “Okay, I respect that. I get it.”

“So. If we go to Rodney and the whatever ruins, we’re agreeing to having a real conversation. About race, and whatever else, but definitely about race.”

“While we’re there?”

“Yes. Afterwards, too. And it’s something we’re both responsible for, not just me.”

“Okay. That’s fair. Deal.”

Looking me steady in the eye, Siekmann reached her hand forward and we shook on it. Then, after looking around to make sure no one was watching, she brought the back of my hand to her winey lips.

Our to-go tiramisu was a gamble that ended up paying off; the tangy mascarpone really hit the spot after a robust lovemaking session back at the prissy B&B.

“Think our hostess heard anything?” Siekmann asked, stretching to set the empty styro-foam container on the bedside table. Gravity made new shapes of her breasts with every fraction of an inch that she twisted. Simultaneously heavier than mine, in terms of mass, and lighter, in terms of hue, they were equal parts delicious and surreal to behold: a pair of titties not my own to caress and play with.

I reached out to give the nipple closer to me one more pinch. “If she did, I guess she could only assume you were in some kind of pain.”

Twenty minutes later, I was having trouble falling asleep, because, yes, we were having fun, and yes, visiting these trifling ruins would test us. The brave part of me was undaunted; the part of me that had reigned throughout mine and Jermaine’s marriage felt beckoned back to deep neural grooves named Avoidance, Denial, and Fear.

There was no question of which part of me had to win. Which is to say that this test shit was more pass/fail than Siekmann could know.

She tightened the arm she had around me. “Darlene, are you awake?”

Was she lying there thinking about the same things? I nodded.

She hesitated. “I feel like I should tell you that I really like you. And I’m not talking about commitment, necessarily. I’m not trying to rush anything. I’m just...I want to go deeper.” She sounded more vulnerable than I’d ever heard her. “I want to have the hard conversations.”

I’ll admit that hearing that gave me butterflies.

* * *

Our backs were pressed together when I woke up, opening my eyes to the painting of a creepy Victorian girl eating a cream puff. We skipped breakfast in the B&B’s china-filled dining room in favor of Natchez’s solitary greasy spoon before hitting the highway.

“Can I ask you something?” Siekmann asked while we cruised up the Natchez Trace Parkway. “Would it be easier for you to go to these places with Jermaine?”

“Jermaine wouldn’t be caught dead at places like this,” I answered, snorting. But my amusement was short lived; after all, just what was I about to do? How was I about to spend one Sunday morning I’d never get back? I fiddled with the Minolta’s strap around my neck—the case was hard, shiny black leather, perfectly molded to the shape of the camera inside it. Its solid weight around my neck was a comfort, legitimizing somehow.

The Windsor Ruins were situated ten minutes or so from the parkway, on a tabletop hill with woods surrounding its steep sides. By the time we pulled up, my coffee had gone right through me. But of course there was no toilet out there, nothing but a historical landmark placard, a bunch of pillars, and a sign warning us that they were unstable.

The pillars were enormous, and Grecian looking: rectangular base, topped by a long, cylindrical column, topped, after maybe thirty feet, by a platform that I guess once held up the roof of the big house. Time had eroded the exterior gray stucco on some of the pillars' foundations, revealing the cheaper-looking orange bricks at the core.

"They're ruins, all right," I pronounced.

"Think Ani DiFranco will host a yoga retreat here next?" Catching sight of my face, Siekmann sobered up.

She stood there reading the placard while I scoped out the area. There was definitely no one else around. Despite my rising need to relieve myself, I couldn't help but look to the trees beyond the pillars. I wondered how many slaves had escaped into them, entrusting their escape to the same sweetgum and cypress some of their progeny would later die by. I haven't lived in Ohio for almost thirty years now, but the South can still feel like one big memorial to me at times, inspiring a depth of reverence I never knew before coming down.

"Whatcha doing over there?" Siekmann called out from behind me.

"I gotta pee." The morning breeze caressed my ass as I lowered my jeans and drawls.

"Me too, now that you mention...Darlene!"

Siekmann started cracking up, yet I had realized something important: why profane these woods if I could relieve myself right on a Windsor pillar? I'd chosen one of the broken-off ones, the top of it biased like a big lipstick. I squatted down, facing out from the pillar, resting one hand on it to keep me steady, clearing my underwear and pants from the pee stream with the other.

"Woman, I am impressed," called Siekmann.

She sounded less impressed, per se, than flat-out astonished. But I was focused on what I was doing. Fuck these ruins. As the pressure of my bladder eased, a giddiness swelled in me.

“That’s better!” I roared, pulling my pants up and clapping my hands. “Take that, you ol’ motherfuckers...”

When I walked back over to Siekmann, her brow was knitted. She smoothed it quick.

“Well I’m not so limber as you, milady,” she said. “Little help?”

She was standing off to the side of the plateau, beyond the perimeter of columns. I wanted Siekmann to piss on the ruins, too. But if she didn’t realize that already, what good would my saying so do?

“You know,” I said as she lowered herself down toward the grass, gripping my hands, “some of my ancestors were in Mississippi. Before they started migrating to the Midwest. According to Ancestry.com.”

Looking up at me from under the bill of her Big Easy Rollergirls cap, Siekmann gave me a careful smile. “Think they lived here?”

“Well, it certainly isn’t the only place in Mississippi where they might have been enslaved. But hey, it’s possible.”

Siekmann squeezed my hands and I helped hoist her back up, widening my stance so I wouldn’t topple over.

“Well...” she said, zipping her jeans and turning back toward the columns, “I guess they’d thank you for sticking it to the Windsors.” She reached a hand back toward me, beckoning me to come stand by her.

“Yeah,” I said, stepping forward, but not taking her hand. “I guess they would.” I walked back over to my pee stain on the broken pillar and took my first photo in twenty years.

* * *

Ten miles from the Windsor Ruins, past the security checkpoint of Alcorn State University, and behind the bookstore at the edge of campus is a dirt road that will take you through the woods to Rodney, Mississippi. I was taking a look at Alcorn State’s Wikipedia page, though the winding of the road combined with reading was making me a little nauseous. It turned out that the school Siekmann had described as “random” wasn’t short on famous alumni.

“Alex Haley,” I repeated, lowering my phone. “*Roots*.” Topical enough; the road was bumpy with the roots of the skinny pine trees that crowded around it.

“Duh.” Siekmann mock struck herself on the forehead. “Okay! Not bad, Alcorn State.”

I spent the rest of the ride to Rodney with my eyes closed, trying to mind-over-matter my stomach, and not just from all the twists and turns of the road. My gameness of the previous night had wilted somewhat, and this whole gambit was looking a little funny in the morning light.

“Looks like we’ve arrived...” Siekmann said after a while.

I felt the dirt road turn into gravel. My eyelids were glowing orange from the sun again. When I opened them, we were clear of the trees, and the sky beyond was scrubbed bright. We were in Rodney.

Siekmann parked the car in front of a dark-bricked old church, its shutter slats punched out like teeth, along with panels of the semi-circle window crowning its door. With one more look at each other, we got out of the Dodge.

Rodney wasn't anything but a gravel road with eight or so sorry buildings huddled at the edge, all of the same dark brick as the church we'd parked by, some of them obviously scorched by the town's big fire, most of them falling down. A thick carpet of crazy clovers, with leaves of all shapes, sprouted on either side of the gravel, exploding into colonies of overgrown kudzu in the cases of some of the buildings. The road extended beyond this cluster of buildings—which were apparently once the downtown—down into a clearing, where we could make out a few more, humbler structures from where we stood. All around us, the woods we'd just emerged from felt impenetrably deep, as if they insulated the town not only in terms of physical space, but years of time.

“Should we go inside?” Siekmann asked, hooking a thumb back at the church. All the sudden I realized how wired she was, like a dog in urgent need of a walk.

For my part, I wasn't prepared for the strange yearning the sight of all the life and death colliding around us stirred in me: sprays of white flowers beside chimneys broken to bricks; fresh rays of sun striking the colored windows of the decades-dormant church. And my own living body among these broken buildings, where the spirits and bodies of folks who looked like me had been broken, with impunity, by folks who looked like Siekmann. It was gorgeous and savage at the same time.

Before I could answer her question, Siekmann pounced, grabbing me by the hips. “Are you into it?”

“Clearly you are.”

She drew back to look at me. “It’s an adventure! Look at all these buildings we can explore. But, only if you want to. Should we stay?”

Siekmann’s eagerness felt foreign to me. But still, I did want to stay. I wanted to see what of this I could capture with my camera. What of this I could take back for myself.

So I nodded. “Yeah. We’re here. Let’s see what there is to see.”

Over Siekmann’s shoulder, I saw an offshoot of the main road I hadn’t noticed initially. To my surprise, there was a white pickup truck parked on it.

“Actually,” I said, stepping back from her, “looks like we’re not alone.”

The whirring of heavy machinery broke the stillness around us. Siekmann shot me a puzzled look, then started heading toward the white truck to investigate. After taking a shot of the main drag, I followed her.

Around the bend of the side road, a small construction crew was applying itself to a large building. I snapped a photo of a worker on a cherry picker, chiseling at the uneven brick wall in front of him. A few other white men were chipping away at the three shorter walls, harvesting the bricks. All their tapping made an irregular rhythm, punctuated by the clunk of a broken brick being tossed onto the mountain of rubble in the middle of the site—which, I noticed, also contained fast food bags and crushed cans of Arizona tea.

As Siekmann and I stood there watching, I sensed her whimsy fading.

“How can they be doing this...?” she asked. “Aren’t these buildings protected or something?”

As we walked down the path, I could see the grout was so ancient it was mostly dust. The men were able to pick some of the bricks off like they were nothing but stacked blocks.

“Evidently not,” I said. “Why would you protect something that’s falling down?”

“You think they’re gonna sell those bricks?”

“I have no clue. Why don’t you ask him?” I nodded at the one man on the ground a yard or so away from us, on the opposite side of the street, who seemed to be overseeing the project.

Siekmann shook her head. When we passed the man, he gave us a perfunctory nod in profile.

“It just seems...profane somehow,” Siekmann murmured as we continued along the road, the sounds of hammering and clanking fading behind us. The path was flanked by ragweed and towering Queen Anne’s lace. “I mean, when Dwight first told me about this place, he called it a ghost town. What kind of profit could they possibly turn for all that labor?”

“Assuming that’s even what they’re doing.” I wasn’t sure what I was finding more irksome, Siekmann fussing about business not her own, her vicarious greed on the behalf of a dude who hadn’t bothered to tell us hello, or her sentimentality about Rodney. “These ain’t exactly hallowed grounds, Siekmann. Fact, I’d expect the builder in you to appreciate the integrity of it.”

As we rounded the bend in the road, a second church parked at the top of a little hill came into view, this one not brick but wood, painted white, its façade devoured by more types of vines and brush than I could readily identify.

“The integrity?” she echoed, seeming slightly defensive.

“Yes. There’s no way that building was good for anything. So, why not repurpose it?” I liked how dispassionate I was sounding, how pragmatic. Coming out at age forty-nine will do that to you.

“Or...let it die a natural death.” When I looked over at Siekmann to let her know how that sounded to me, her head was tilted back, her hand cupped over her eyes. “I’m sorry. I know I sound ridiculous. You’re right.” To my relief, she started laughing at herself.

“I was about to say...”

As we neared the building, it was clear that the vines were strangling each other too tightly to give us access to the church’s main entrance. I took a picture of the barricaded door, and we started tracing the perimeter for another way in.

“It’s just,” Siekmann went on suddenly, letting her fingers trace along the church’s jungly wall, “part of me feels like it’s a waste, I guess. I feel like this place could be of some educational value, and—wait. Bingo.”

We’d come to a back door, which Siekmann was able to open with a little force. She led the way into a close, musty-smelling passageway to the area behind the altar. Then, we emerged out onto the dais, which was made of tired thin pine boards. There was a rubbly mound where a podium or something should have been: broken planks of wood and shambles of plaster. The light was filtered pastel gray. We stood there a moment, observing the church’s strange stillness.

“Historical and educational aren’t the same thing,” I said into the silence. I thought of Jermaine, folding the black history his students wouldn’t otherwise get into the sanctioned curriculum, needing them to know that the monuments we see are never the full story.

Siekmann wrested her attention back from the church’s rafters. “Come again?”

“About Rodney. You were saying—”

“Oh,” she interrupted, “I don’t even know what I was saying. Forget it.” She hopped down from the dais and filed into the front pew. “Looks like the ceiling’s starting to cave in there,” she said, pointing up.

“I won’t forget it.” I trained my camera on what was apparently the resulting pile of debris, trying to catch Siekmann in the background as she wove slowly through the pews. An old organ hunkered above us, its pipes probably choked with cobwebs and rust. “I’m saying just because something is historical doesn’t necessarily mean it’s of educational value.”

“Okay. So where does beauty fit into it?”

When I lowered the camera, I realized she was shooting me a corny look from the pews.

“Don’t try and charm your way out of this.” I stepped down from the dais and started making my way down the main aisle, back toward the rectory where we’d first tried to enter. Siekmann had passed through the archway leading to it, moving away from the conversation I was trying to work up to. In my view, this little test of ours was off to a shaky start. I needed some reassurance that it was worth bothering with at all.

“I want to talk about this, seriously,” I called after her, a little awkwardly. “I thought you did, too.”

“I do want to talk about, seriously,” Siekmann answered, her voice muffled now. “Isn’t beauty serious? You’re the one with the camera out. So what do you do with that?”

I heard her footsteps somewhere above me. “Where even are you?”

“Checking out the upstairs! I can still hear you, though...I don’t know. I guess I’m saying there’s beauty in the oldness, and isn’t that worth something?”

I stepped into the small rectory. The light coming in through the front windows was green-tinted from the vines stretching over them. Behind me, I found the tightly wound spiral staircase Siekmann must have climbed. I went to stand at the foot of it, irritated, but not wanting to show it yet.

“In this case I can’t separate the beautiful from the ugly,” I called up the shaft. “Who do you suppose built this church? I mean, what do you actually *feel*, being here?”

From above me came the low creaking of floorboards. Siekmann was quiet for a minute.

“I don’t know, Darlene. Honestly, right now I’m just experiencing it as a bunch of old buildings. It’s hard for me to—imagine life actually being lived in them. Let alone life like *that*. Maybe that’s lame, but that’s why museums are helpful. Why don’t you come up here? If we’re gonna talk about this now. It’s a nice view, could make a good photo.”

I watched dust flurry from the rectory ceiling. Not only had I never truly talked about “this” with a white person before, I had no idea how I’d even want such a conversation to go, beyond not wanting to nurse their feelings, or sugarcoat my own. I’d seen my brother Ellis do just that between his many girlfriends and two wives, and watched him waste away to literal non-existence as a result.

But these speculative boundaries of mine rested on the assumption that said white person would in fact *have* feelings about “this” to share. Instead, Siekmann at least seemed dead-set on keeping her emotions separate from the history her body was finding itself tangled up in today. As if Rodney was an American Pompeii, and the Civil War that helped cripple it as inevitable as a volcanic eruption: no deeper story worthy of consideration, no politics. Just a fossilized spectacle to be consumed.

When I set foot on the bottom-most step, the whole building seemed to groan. I thought of how easily the bricks of that other building had come apart. Who was regulating this shit? Nobody. I hazarded the second step, but it felt like it would bust under me. Dread threw a heavy cloak over me, if not about the staircase, then about something.

“It feels pretty rickety, Siekmann. Maybe you should come back down.”

“Come on,” she urged invisibly. “If I can make it up, you can. Trust me.”

Logically, I knew she was probably right—she was the engineer between us, after all. But I also know that the rules of this world don’t always work the way they should.

* * *

After the churchhouse, we found our way back to the main road, passing the construction crew still working their game of reverse Tetris. The physicality of taking pictures with the Minolta, versus the skittish tapping of smartphone photography, kept me deep in the sights and sounds of our search, in the smells of must and wood rot, the sun warming the sweat on the back of my neck as we moved from building to building. The images I made of this strange trip would be lasting, I kept reminding myself, even if I wasn’t yet sure what effect the trip would have on my relationship with Georgia Siekmann.

We had fallen into what an optimist or a stranger would describe as a meditative silence. After I declined to break my neck or worse on that spiral staircase, we’d silently agreed to table for the time being the task of naming the parts of the elephant in the room—or rather, the elephant in the churches, in the houses, and stomping down the main drag of Rodney along with us.

Meanwhile Siekmann seemed to bear less and less resemblance to the woman I'd made love with just the night before. Her trademark easygoing manner was replaced by a reserve I recognized as lowkey pissy without dignifying it as such.

I wouldn't lighten up, and I guess that had her feeling a little put out; O.K. Maybe this trip wouldn't be about us getting more serious, after all. Maybe to Siekmann, "ghost town" was no reference to any actual afterlife—no restless souls mourning lives that would remain forever half-lived.

After making a handful of innocuous comments to her, I gave up and focused on taking pictures. I captured her fingers against the ivory-striped keys of the piano in the church we parked by. I caught the silvery innards of a TV set smashed on the floor of what seemed to have once been a bar: disorienting proof that time *had* continued for Rodney even after the Civil War still hanging over it like a vapor was done. (Evidently, my own presence there in the year 2018 wasn't a big enough indication of that.)

The heart of town soon fell away, the gravel crumbling back into dirt. The houses we headed toward were more spaced out, rusted fences demarcating the seeded lawns of Rodney's tiny de facto suburb. At this point I had only four exposures left on the Minolta and I was about ready to hit the road.

Then we spotted the laundry drying on the fence some yards down.

"Who could that belong to...?" asked Siekmann, with a hint of her wonder of earlier.

I was taking a picture of the clothes, dropped over fence like petals from a supersize magnolia: men's undershirts with buttery pits; children's garments that had been infiltrated by red, or else umpteen washes had diluted their original brightness. The soft palette set off the

abandoned house in the background, its shutters too crooked to hide the spider-cracks of its windows.

Suddenly I shared Siekmann's earlier failure of imagination: I couldn't picture anyone actually living in one of these falling down houses, in this decimated speck of a town, doing their laundry week after week and hoping for a sunny sky to lay it out under. I couldn't picture anyone, black, white, or otherwise, persisting under such an imposing reminder of a future that could have been, and a past that had yet to completely die. In my eyes, Rodney somehow encapsulated the heart of our American story: unfulfilled grandiosity, misplaced nostalgia, life and death easily mistaken for one another.

When I turned back from the laundry to look at Siekmann, my eyes fell on the house across the road behind her. A tall, elderly woman black like wet loam was stepping out of the house into the sun.

Her own fence was also covered in laundry, I realized, mostly bedsheets and jeans. She unlatched the gate between the drying things, her eyes lowered. When she stepped out onto the road, I saw that the handle of a big, empty jug hung from the ring and pinky fingers of her free hand. My heart splintered at the sight of her: the slightness of her frame, the down-colored fly-aways escaping her low bun, the lavender T-shirt she wore underneath her sleeveless denim dress. She could've been an auntie, or a friend of one of mine and Jermaine's elderly neighbors for whom we'd occasionally make groceries or pick up library books.

I was suddenly right there with her, where seconds earlier, I couldn't have imagined her. I knew right then I'd trade all the other shots on my roll for her portrait.

I was with the woman, but I was also with Siekmann. "Wow. She lives here?" she said.

The woman was acting like she didn't see us, closing the gate behind her and starting down the road opposite of the heart of town.

"Apparently so," I answered.

"I didn't think...Should we talk to her?"

I was ahead of Siekmann. "How you doing, ma'am?" I called out.

"All right, all right..." she answered. Then, to my surprise, she paused in her tracks, her back still to us.

"You—you live here in Rodney?" Siekmann asked.

The woman nodded.

"About how many people live here, full time?" Siekmann asked.

"We're just passing through," I put in.

"Well, not too many, now..." the woman answered. Then she turned to face us. Her eyes were deep-set, the whites of them yellowish against the depth of her skin, her pupils partly cloudy. The old saying about black folks' enduringly youthful looks aside, this elder's forehead was dense with wrinkles. She was no ghost to life.

"Get the hunters coming through, depending," she added with a shrug, pointing with her elbow at a trailer farther down the road. "They got a filter in their trailer they let us use." She raised and lowered the jug.

Siekmann started asking questions about how the woman's trash removal, mail, and other services worked, where her water came from, how long her people had been in Rodney. I can't say I wasn't wondering similar things, but I could sense the woman's growing regret at having stopped to speak to us.

“Ma’am,” I broke in before Siekmann moved on to asking the woman’s shoe size, “I hope you’ll excuse us. We’re just some nosy tourists up from New Orleans for the day.” I didn’t know how to properly express my relief—my gratitude—at crossing paths with her out on her errand. Seeing whatever foolass, entreating look must’ve been on my face, she gave me something close to a smile of mercy.

“It’s really something out here,” I went on, looking at Siekmann, who evaded my glance.

“I suppose. Lived here all my life,” the woman said for the second time. “Got some of my kids in there with me, their kids.”

“I hope you don’t mind me asking”—Siekmann looked over at me—“but, do you happen to know anything about that construction project going on?”

I’d steeled myself for her to ask something out of line with that opener, but nope, just this again.

“There in town?” the woman asked. “Used to be the old general store. Hadn’t been nothing for years now.”

“Listen, we appreciate you speaking with us, ma’am,” I said hurriedly, “and we don’t mean to keep you. It’s just...” I lifted up the camera that still hung around my neck. “I would love to take your picture in front of your home, if you wouldn’t mind.”

The woman chuckled. “Ain’t seen no camera like that in a while.” She hoisted the jug up in her arms, its green glass catching the light.

“I know,” I said, smiling. “I been taking pictures all around town. It’s been taking me back. Would it be all right? I’ll mail you a copy, even.”

She shook her head heartily. “That’s fine.”

“That be all right?”

“That be fine.” She seemed bashful, but pleased.

I took a few steps backwards to get more of her house in the shot. Siekmann, moving aside to clear it, shot me a pinched-looking grin. The woman looked directly into the camera with a serene expression on her face. The sequins on the child’s jeans drying on the fence just past her right shoulder twinkled. Behind her, her ramshackle house loomed, split between shadow and light.

We nodded at each other after I released the camera’s shutter, then the woman started back on her way to the lodge. Siekmann and I stood there watching her back get smaller as she moved down the road.

“We didn’t even get her name,” Siekmann said ruefully.

“I guess not.” The thought of introducing myself had occurred to me, but the better part of me knew there was no point. We wouldn’t be meeting again, and I wouldn’t need a name to remember her.

“Well, wasn’t that rude? Of us?”

“Which name would you have given her?” Siekmann grimaced. I had shot for some levity and apparently missed. “I was just teasing...And us knowing her name wouldn’t have changed the fact that we’re gawking at her home.”

Without discussing it, we’d turned and were heading back toward the car. Our adventure was over; Rodney had become real.

“Well, exactly. Didn’t you feel it was a little, I don’t know, fetishizing? Taking her picture?”

In my chest, my heart sprouted little barbs around it. “No. I didn’t see her as my prop. I saw her as my willing subject. Which is what she was.”

“That’s true...I guess I just feel like that’s what somebody could have said about me, theoretically. That I was tokenizing her or something.”

I clicked my tongue. “That’s how you wanna play this? Reverse racism?”

Siekmann threw her hands up. “We said we were gonna talk about how we feel about this. Well, here I am, talking. I’m sorry it isn’t good enough.”

“Slow down.”

“Fine.” I didn’t expect Siekmann to actually stop in her tracks. “Ever since the construction site you’ve been judging me—no, ever since the Windsor Ruins. It’s like you think it’s wrong of me to want to enjoy this at all. You wanna know how I feel? Well, that’s how.”

She was waiting on me to find some sense in there to build on. I sighed. “Well that’s not what I’ve been thinking...Tell me how you think I’ve been judging you.”

I promised myself I wouldn’t do this, wouldn’t take care of her in this conversation. That’s exactly what it felt like I was doing—but on the other hand, I realized right then, how else could I respond without being an asshole of a girlfriend? What was the difference between being a good partner in this—not just this conversation right now, but the interrogation of race between us in general—and playing nursemaid to a white woman’s fragility? Could there even be one? And if Siekmann was this worked up by a conversation that had barely begun, would I ever be able to ask her to take care of me?

“You thought me being upset about the deconstruction was racist somehow,” she answered. “You thought because I didn’t pee on the ruins like you did, that meant something about me.”

“Maybe you’re the one who thought it meant something about you. I don’t get why you’re getting so upset, Siekmann.”

Her face was animated. “Oh, so that’s all me? You were the one acting like I rejected you when I wanted to go upstairs in the first church.”

I scoffed. “You were the one running away from the conversation.”

“I was not! Look, I wanted to take this trip to get *closer* with you. I wasn’t planning on all this...heaviness.”

“Well then maybe we should’ve stuck more to our original plan.” I let out a long exhale. “Okay. You’re upset I took an old woman’s picture? No... You’re upset that *you* couldn’t take that picture? Maybe. You’re upset that this—race—is something that comes between us? Yeah. But, guess what? That’s just how it is. And we either deal with each other, and deal with that, or we don’t.” Right about then, the latter was starting to look more attractive. “And all that is about *so* much more than me judging you or whatever. It has everything to do with me protecting my integrity”—that word again, making a tiny muscle in Siekmann’s neck jump—“as a black woman in this relationship with you.”

“Okay, there’s you. What about us? It’s not just race, Darlene. We *are* dealing with each other, in a world that doesn’t want us to. I mean, doesn’t the fact that we’re even together count for something?”

“Where do people get this idea? Us being together doesn’t mean a thing if we don’t make something of it.”

“Sometimes just being *is* political!”

“Okay, but on whose terms? Our own? Okay, well, you and I made a pact about being here today. I’m simply calling on us to honor it. Otherwise we’re no different from the founders of this town, banking on a bright future we ain’t never gonna have.”

Siekmann squinted at me, almost amused. “You’re saying we’re gonna get burned, like the Rodneyites of yore?”

“I’m saying a relationship built on avoiding something this important would just become a shrine to our cowardice.” I thought of Jermaine; for all his loving understanding, I still struggled with guilt about taking so long to be straight with him (no pun intended). “I thought you wanted to go deeper with me.”

“Darlene, I swear, I’m trying. Really. What more can I tell you?”

I thought a minute. “Tell me why you were upset when I grabbed your hand in front of that waiter last night.”

“Jesus, everything’s so high stakes with you—and I mean, I admire that! It’s part of what makes you so hot. But, look...I get that you want me to be braver. Brave like you were to end things with Jermaine. Meanwhile I still let my parents call me Georgia so they don’t disown me.”

“Siekmann—”

“No, it’s true. And I guess that’s what all the women I’ve been with have wanted from me. I just...don’t want to risk losing what I have. Is that so crazy? I’ve lost enough already...”

She was quiet a minute. I crossed my arms, wondering what she might be referencing, besides the romantic relationships that had ended precisely *because* of (I gathered) Siekmann's own fear of change.

"You know, Darlene," she said. "I don't know if your pictures are any good. But I know it takes bravery to make anything worthwhile. And that life is one big creation...I get it. I'm not trying to say I haven't had choices."

"Okay, then." My barbed heart had climbed up into my throat, I realized too late, my words coming out ragged. "Why don't you tell me how shitty it feels to be here with me, and that's why you wanna skate on the surface? Admit how it feels to know what this town stood for. And what that means for you and for me. Tell me how it feels to have asked me to come here with you anyway, and then refuse to engage with me on the only shit that matters between us right now."

For the first time, Siekmann looked actually mad. "First of all, explain to *me* how I'm refusing. And second," she said, "I'm puzzled by the fact that you're so fixated on Rodney with this. Who do you think built the French Quarter? How bout this country? I'm *sure* you know more about all that than me."

"You're right, booboo, I know all about all that," I answered, sweet as battery acid.

"And, so, third of all, how can you expect me to go around feeling bad all the time? I didn't do what they did. I wouldn't—"

"How can you possibly know that!?" Now I was angry, too.

"—wouldn't have kept slaves, or beaten them, or taken their children away, or any of that fucked up shit those people did. Didn't, wouldn't—so, no, I don't feel shitty. Not for myself!

And I'm not even saying that I *shouldn't*. But honestly, I don't. The only thing I feel bad about right now is that it's ruining our trip."

"What was 'it,' again?" She couldn't even keep straight whether she would've beaten the slaves she wouldn't have had. *Shit*.

"Racism!" Siekmann exclaimed, acting like just saying the damn word took something out of her. "Slavery. The past. All of it."

"Listen. You can go by whatever name you like. I can't change the color of my skin even if I wanted to."

"So now we're competing?"

I ignored her. "What good does it do me if you feel bad all or half the time? Know what I really want? I really want you to give a damn about how *I'm* feeling in all this—and you right, not just this trip. I'm talking everything."

Siekmann studied me for a long minute. "It took you twenty years to realize what needed to happen between you and Jermaine," she said.

"Fuck you."

"No, I'm saying! You *know* how long it can take to get it together. Even if you know what you're afraid of dealing with is hurting you." I was alarmed to realize her eyes were shiny with tears, soft like an ashamed little child's. "Would it be possible for you to be patient with me, Darlene? Please?"

As Siekmann explained how racism was something every force in her life compelled her to look away from, I thought of the whiskey Jermaine and I had shared when I told him a truth of myself that I'd known, deep down, all my life. A truth I'd been taught to hate and fear. Jermaine

held his face well, even when I said the word “lesbian.” He heard me out as fairly as he would have one of his students, or the children he and I never ended up having. And even within that nest of trust built over years of shared good fortune and hardship, set in the branches of our ancestrally commingled family trees, I’d never been more afraid in my life.

And the fact that Siekmann’s bitch ass had just compared that conversation, to the idea of Siekmann sacrificing even a fraction of her own comfort, made it easy for me to shut my heart against her tears.

“...And I get how you feel,” she was insisting, although she had not actually asked me about this once today. “It’s obvious how angry you are. I’m not—”

“I’m not mad, Siekmann.” Although, I was. “I’m just done.” Oh, I definitely was. “Look, I like you. It’s not even that. It’s just there’s nothing I can possibly say to get myself across—”

“But I’m listening!”

To be honest, it took all my restraint not to pop her one right about then. Instead, I spoke slowly: “I’m saying not all the time or words in the world would make it clear between us—and really, I got no more time to waste, anyway.”

Siekmann’s back was to the path the woman from Rodney had disappeared down. She was squinting into the sun as she pulled off her roller derby hat and started fanning herself with it. Without the cap on, she looked far less jaunty and much more tired. The crow’s feet around her eyes the color of rainwater jumped into sharper definition. Her lips parted, and there was the gap in her teeth I’d prodded with my tongue hours earlier. She ran her fingers through her sweaty hair, the thick silver band she wore on her index finger gleaming.

“You said you’re done. What are you done with?” she asked finally. All her guile was gone; she sounded just as tired as she looked. The thing was, contrary to what you’d expect and to what we get taught, in that moment of weary vulnerability, Siekmann was more beautiful to me than ever.

My extra extra urge was striking once again; those last few exposures were burning a hole in my Minolta.

“Can I ask you something?” I realized I was ignoring her question, but we both already knew the answer, and sometimes a photographer needs to be decisive. “Can I take your picture, Siekmann?”

She squinted. “What? Right now?”

I nodded. I wanted to tell her what I was thinking, but I was afraid it would come out sounding cheap.

She studied me like I was someone she’d known in her distant past and wished she could just forget.

“No. I don’t think so,” she said, pulling her cap back onto her head, dabbing her eyes dry on the shoulder of her T-shirt.

That’s when our silent journey back to New Orleans effectively began.

* * *

Siekmann let me out at the corner of Broad and St. Ann, a good fifteen minute walk from my apartment. My roller suitcase tripped over the higgelty-piggelty sidewalk behind me. Crayola-

colored shotgun houses I used to pass every single day rang nostalgic bells in my soul with their trimwork painted all shaky, and beautifully loud. I walked quickly, hoping no former neighbors of mine would flag me down. I wasn't sure I'd be able to hold it together with some of them, after the day I'd had.

It was almost five on a Sunday, a time when Jermaine is typically home. But when I got to what was once my house, the garage was shut and nobody answered the front door. I took a seat on the porch furniture we got from Costco years ago, even though more sitting is the last thing I feel like doing: I'm parched and a little ripe-smelling, my lower back stiff and compacted.

I didn't have to wait long before I saw the shape of Jermaine emerging from way down St. Ann, most likely on his way back from walking the bayou. He was wearing one of his weekend shirts, what I used to call his Cosby shirts to get under his skin.

"I saw you coming from five blocks away with that shirt," I called from my perch when he was within range.

Jermaine's head jerked back, and he looked blank for a minute as he registered me. I was afraid that I'd done the wrong thing, that I'd forfeited my right to show up unannounced and just expect him to deal with me, however amicable our separation.

But if it was selfish of me, Jermaine didn't say. He just climbed the tile steps to take a seat beside me, his smell of cloves and Barbasol and cherry cough drops just the same as ever.

"So you tired of that raggedy apartment already?" he asked, nodding at my suitcase. For all the students he claimed had shaved years off his life, he still looked so boyish when he smiled like that.

"Can I talk something out with you? It's about a woman, sort of. You can tell me no."

“Let’s just see how it goes,” he answered once he got over the initial surprise.

We split a beer into two cups and watched the afternoon deepen, folks passing us by as I told him every aspect of the trip that was appropriate to share.

“Then, as we get off at Orleans,” I said, finishing up, “she has the nerve to say, ‘This might go without saying, but I guess we should make a clean break of this.’”

“Nmn,” Jermaine hummed.

“I didn’t even bother saying anything back. And then I came here.”

For Jermaine to hear even the outline of how things had been with Siekmann was an enormous generosity. Yet I was a little stunned to have completed my telling and still feel so riled up—not by mine and Siekmann’s argument, or even our breakup. Both of those things were predictable enough, in retrospect, and I couldn’t say I truly regretted either one of them, or the strange turn our trip had taken, for that matter.

No, what stuck with me was how much, actually, I wished Siekmann had let me take that picture of her. I wished I would send the film off and get a copy of her face looking the way it had. Then I’d send the portrait to her, like I wouldn’t be able to send the woman from Rodney hers. That may sound cruel, but it would have been a gift, a parting gift: here’s what you look like when you’re real. The woman from Rodney didn’t need to be shown this; Siekmann did.

Which led me to wonder whether I actually wanted less to be in a relationship—of whatever racial composition—than I wanted to actually, finally, unashamedly, explore seeing things the way that *I* saw them. To try to make art of that, and do something with it. Even without the portrait of Siekmann, the thought of getting the prints developed was way more exciting than the thought of firing my OKCupid account back up. I wasn’t sure what I’d see when I eventually sat

down with the pictures—but there would be something in them, some story I'd told. I imagined sliding them into gold-edged frames and hanging them on the wall of my apartment—the home I finally felt ready to make of it, the boxes I'd finally find the gumption to unpack.

“So why did you come over here?” asked Jermaine. True to form, he'd remained mostly silent until I was done talking.

I exhaled. “I just couldn't come home to an empty apartment after visiting a ‘former city’ with my now former girlfriend.” I watched Jermaine blink as I said the word “girlfriend”; I'd managed to avoid it up till now.

“So you return to the scene of your former marriage...Hey, Darlene,” he said, tipping his chin at me. “I want you to know this can always be a home to you—within reason. I'm not saying drop by with the next white lady for Sunday dinner or nothing.”

I snorted. “I doubt there'll be another one.”

“One never knows. You and me know that much.”

When I thanked him for sitting and listening to me and my foolishness, Jermaine grinned.

“After all this time, I'm used to it. So. Why did you agree to go?”

“Well, part of it was taking Siekmann at her word. I believed that we both wanted to be real.” I considered. “But honestly, more than that even, I was just excited to take some pictures.” I patted the Minolta, still around my neck. Still two exposures left.

Jermaine raised his eyebrows. “You went to ruins in the middle of nowhere, Mississippi—plantation ruins, no less—with an unvetted white woman—just to take some damn pictures?”

I hesitated. But, “Yup. That's what happened.”

“Well, shoot. Maybe you should start taking more pictures, then.”

“You know, there may be something to that.”

The old rooster on the next block heralded the start of sundown.

“I got one more question for you before I kick you off my porch,” said Jermaine, “because I do have somebody coming over tonight for Sunday dinner, in fact.”

“Would that be a lady friend?” I felt a twinge of jealousy even as I smiled through my words.

Jermaine eyed me. “Don’t go prying, now. You’re the one in the hot seat.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

He clicked his tongue. “*Anyway*, my last point—what’s this lady’s name again?”

I rolled my eyes. “Georgia Siekmann.”

“Okay. You just implied that Georgia Siekmann wasn’t being real. But to me it sounds like she was.”

His point took me off guard. “I mean, so she said. But you weren’t there, Jermaine. You didn’t see how...juvenile she was. Like, avoidant and combative at once.” I was starting to get worked up again. “Like she resented me, but also wanted to impress me, but also wanted me to help her? And then tryna tell me how racism is everywhere, and—”

“I don’t need to hear all that to know she *was* being real,” Jermaine interrupted. “You just didn’t like the realness she was putting down. Most definitely nothing wrong with that. Sometimes we get to choose what we deal with, and that’s a beautiful thing.” He shrugged. “Just some perspective.”

I rested an elbow on my knee, leaning on it as I smiled lazily at him. Jermaine was partly

right. At the same time, I knew there was no way I could explain the realness of Siekmann that I *had* liked: her curiosity, her charm, her candor in bed.

And then how different she had looked when all that fell away, and she was just a lost and weary person. Truth was, I'd been there. A few key differences between us aside, I had most definitely been where she was.

I stood up from my seat, relishing the stretch. "I don't know if anyone's ever told you this, Jermaine, but you're pretty wise." In fact, I told him that all the time. "One question for you—not about your date, swear. Then I'm out of your luscious locs."

I have a feeling I got a good picture of Jermaine sitting there on his porch steps, pretending not to be flattered. As for the one he took of me down on the sidewalk with my suitcase in hand, I'm looking forward to seeing how it turns out.

VITA

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